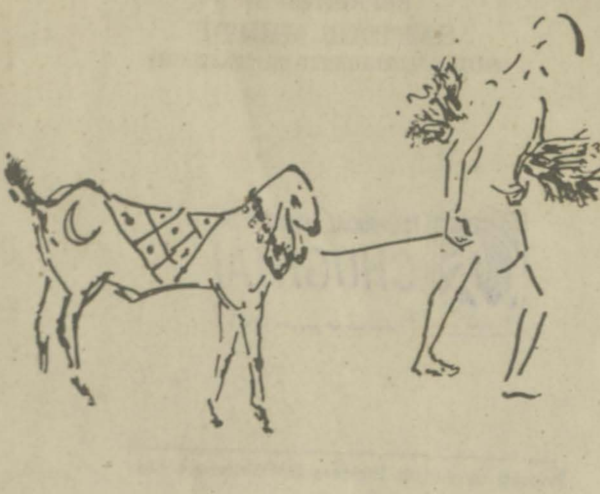
Karachi 1979

THE WATERLESS MOON

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ELIZABETH BALNEAVES



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For

HOPE

who made this book possible, and

DAVID

without whose encouragement
it would never have been written

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SHOULD the succeeding pages succeed in conveying anything to the reader of the country where I have spent so many happy days, then my first, most humble and wholly inadequate thanks are due, not to any celebrities—I met but few—but to countless unnamed, ordinary people, eking out a precarious livelihood in tiny villages all over the country; from the tribesmen of the barren Frontier hills to the simple Sindhi fisherfolk to whose implicit trust, friendship and hospitality I owe so much.

Among so many who helped to smooth my path I should like to tender my grateful thanks to the officers and men of the Royal Pakistan Air Force and Squadron-Leader Qadus in particular; to the Wali of Swat for his gracious hospitality; likewise to Sir John Dring and the Public Relations Office of Bahawalpur State, and to John Dent and all the members of the Peshawar Vale Hunt. My thanks are also due in no small measure to F. D. Douglas of the Press Information Department in Karachi, who, along with my old friends Jamil-ud-din Ahmad and Dr. A. Waheed, were never failing in encouragement and advice.

I am grateful to Messrs. John Farquharson for granting permission, on behalf of the Executors of the late Dr. E. Œ. Somerville, to quote an extract from *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* by Somerville and Ross, and to Messrs. Faber and Faber Ltd. for permission to quote a passage from Stephen Spender's poem, "I think continually of those who were truly great", from his book *Poems*.

Finally to Sir William Barton, whose name is still spoken with reverence and affection in the North-West Frontier Province he knows so well, who, with his usual kindliness, consented to read the manuscript, goes my deep gratitude for a Foreword, far beyond that which I deserve.

ELIZABETH BALNEAVES

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Photographs by

RONALD ZIAR

and the author

FOREWORD

by Sir William Barton, K.C.I.E., C.S.I.

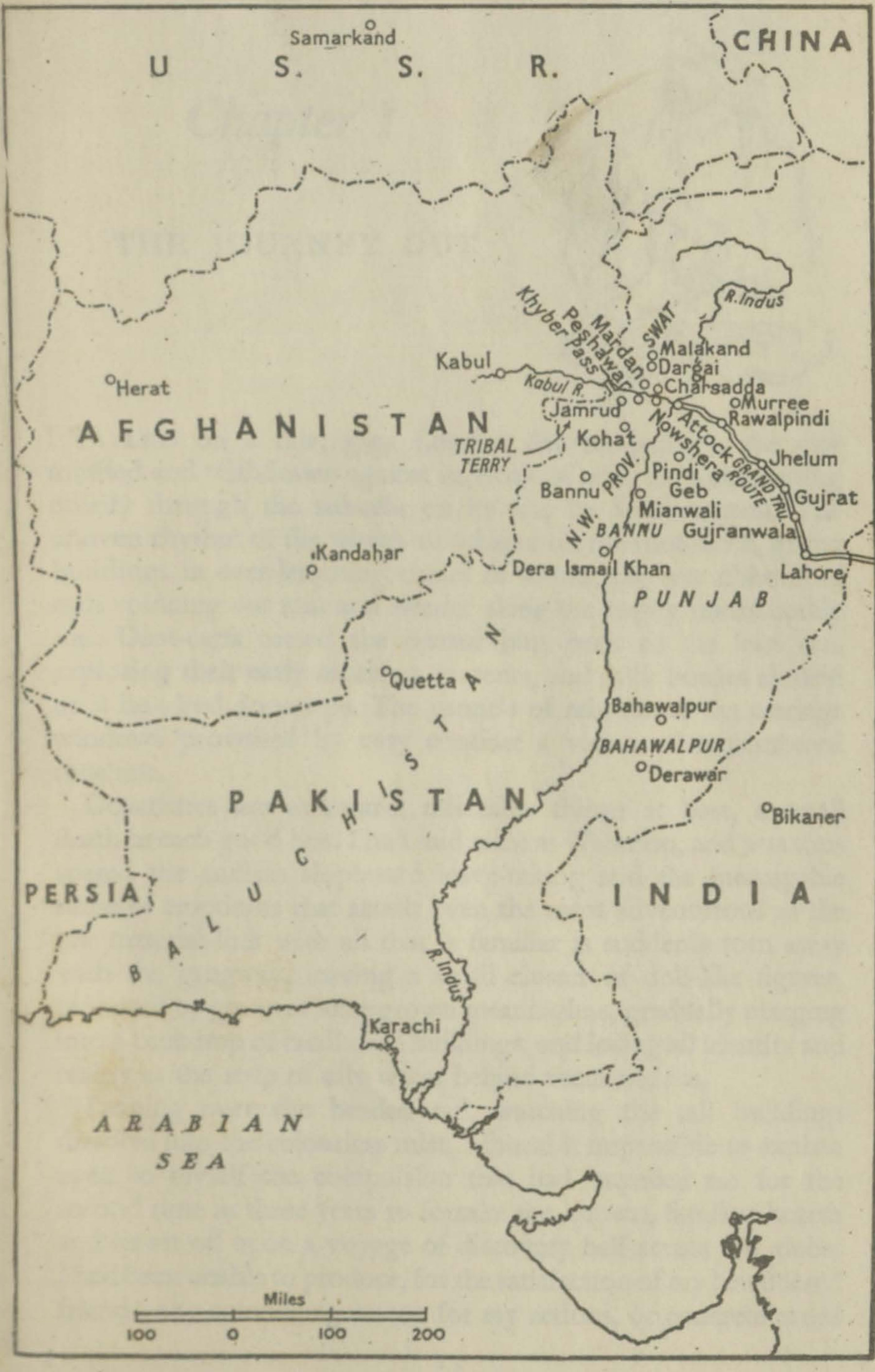
THIS is an extraordinary book, written by an extraordinary young woman, a young woman of courage and grit, inspired with an avidity for adventure, the more dangerous the more attractive, and with all this that rare gift of close observation, and the faculty of describing what she sees in vivid language.

This book with its arresting title records a visit of some two years to Pakistan, most of it spent on the Afghan frontier, in close touch with the life of the people, in particular of the lower middle classes and the peasantry. Commenting generally on the writer's travels, one feels that the fact that a young European woman could live the life she describes in the Punjab towns and countryside and especially on the Afghan frontier, unmolested, everywhere welcomed and treated like the traditional *mem-sahib* is a tribute to the innate chivalry of the Punjabi and Pathan and to the quality of the Administration. The friendly eye of officialdom undoubtedly helped; so too did the reputation of "Farida Bano" (her travel name) as a lady doctor. A useful knowledge of Urdu and Pushtu stood her in good stead. Her older men friends among the Muslims did not approve of her freedom from the *burqa*, and at times she had to overcome her prejudice and wear it. To her grit and courage must be added an amazing power of endurance of hardship and sometimes of extremely unpleasant experiences.

The book has a political value. Pakistan, allied with Turkey and strengthened with U.S.A. military aid, is destined to play an outstanding part in the defence of the Middle East, and so to contribute to world peace. Her membership of the Commonwealth means much to Britain, and it is essential that people in Britain should take an interest in her. They will find in *The Waterless Moon* attractive sidelights on the life and psychology of Pakistan, with vistas of its history and politics. One hopes the book will be widely read.

Miss Balneaves is about to undertake a fresh expedition, this time to East Pakistan. We shall look forward to a description of her adventures in another book.

WILLIAM BARTON



Samarkand
U S S R
CHINA
R. Indus
SWAT
Mardan
Peshawar
Khyber Pass
Malakand
Dargai
Charsadda
Kabul
Herat
Kabul R.
Jamrud
Murree
Rawalpindi
AFGHANISTAN
Kohat
Attock
Nowshera
GRAND TRU.
ROUTE
Jhelum
TRIBAL
TERRY
PROV.
Pindi
Geb
Gujrat
Bannu
Mianwali
N.W.
BANNU
Gujranwala
Kandahar
Dera Ismail Khan
Lahore
PUNJAB
Quetta
Bahawalpur
BAHAWALPUR
Derawar
PAKISTAN
Bikaner
BALUCHISTAN
PERSIA
INDIA
R. Indus
Karachi
ARABIAN
SEA
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200

Chapter 1

THE JOURNEY OUT



I SAILED on a raw, grey London day in January, the city muffled and withdrawn against its cloak of rain, the train rattling noisily through the suburbs on its way to Southampton. The uneven rhythm of the wheels ricocheted off the soot-laden, grimy buildings in ever-lessening circles of sound, the wet ribbons of rails spinning out taut and slender along the empty tracks beside me. Dust-carts tossed the dented bins back to the lean cats exploring their early morning contents, and milk bottles clinked on a hundred doorsteps. The runnels of rain down the carriage windows provoked by very contrast a vision of remembered sunshine.

Departures are awkward, miserable things at best, a small death in each good-bye. I had said mine at Waterloo, and was thus spared the endless shipboard leave-taking and the inescapable sense of emptiness that assails even the most adventurous as the last material link with all that is familiar is suddenly torn away with the gangway, leaving a small cluster of doll-like figures, animated by gestures long grown meaningless, gradually merging into a backdrop of cardboard buildings, and losing all identity and reality as the strip of oily water behind them widens.

Leaning over the beaded rail, watching the tall buildings dissolve into the colourless mist, I found it impossible to explain even to myself the compulsion that had impelled me for the second time in three years to forsake the known, familiar hearth and to set off upon a voyage of discovery half across the globe. I had been unable to produce, for the satisfaction of my bewildered friends, any convincing reason for my actions, or concrete proof

of the deep-rooted fascination with which Pakistan and especially its North-West Frontier had caught and held me, or to show why I should have found amid the rock-bound Frontier hills, where "The moon turns in the sky, Over lands without water", the *querencia* or chosen place of my seeking.

"*La cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.*" Perhaps it was only because the synthesis of its being seemed right to me, or maybe right for me; for in the glow of that first fine careless rapture I had listened only to the voices echoing in the forgotten soul of a people who suddenly, like homing birds, had gathered together in an access of religious fervour to establish a strip of territory as their own inalienable right. Pakistan, Land of the Pure, with the blood of Alexander of Macedon, Timur the Lame and Ghengis Khan flowing in her veins, and watered by her antique rivers that had sung in the ears of the mystic Buddhist pilgrims and the Kushana kings, and made homesick the heart of Babur as he stood, conqueror on an alien soil. I had not then become aware of the youngest Islamic country in the world largely as a heterogenous collection of bewildered Muslims, mentally and spiritually shipwrecked within the boundaries of a new state, refugees, many of whom had no roots save in the distant past.

For the past nine months I had ached for a sight of the Frontier hills, and existed in an agony of impatience to find some way of returning. I longed to crouch again in a watch tower in Tribal Territory and hear the whine of a bullet whistle through the pass; to lie at night on a hard rope *charpoy* on a roof top, underneath the wanton prodigality of stars blazing above, with lightning playing round the circling hills, and listen to the wild Pushtu music bursting like tearing silk into the silence; to watch again the jade lizards with jewelled eyes and ridiculous pink feet like hands, and hear the fragile waxen cups of the cactus flowers rustle in the cool morning breeze. Once again to stand on the bridge at Attock beneath the shadow of Akbar's Fort where the Kabul and the Indus meet in a tumbling torrent of yellow foam; to listen again to the nostalgic music of camel bells as a caravan swings through the Khyber, or the tinkle of anklets on some Powindah gipsy girl, trekking down from Khorassan.

Soon, maybe, the colour that captured my imagination will

disappear, for at the moment the country is undergoing a prolonged transitional stage; but nothing can be measured in a series of definitive lines; least of all the history of a people, and the encroachment of the West and all it stands for may well run into another hundred years. I am reminded sadly enough of a parallel in Freya Stark's *Baghdad Sketches*: "Six years have passed and the outlines are fainter still, the uniformity of progress more inexorable, the benefits of civilization more difficult to control."

There lies, however, at the core of every culture or racial grouping, no matter what its stage, a potential beauty to be enjoyed, provided one grasps the limitations and boundaries of the moment; a *manière de sentir* as Baudelaire calls it, which is there for the taking. My second visit is therefore in the nature of a last private conversation with a people setting out on an unknown journey. I am like a child running to snatch the treasures left by yesterday's tide; the razor shells and the small crabs, the shining halves of the mussels before the next jostling wave surges in and carries them beyond my reach for ever, leaving behind it only a smooth, wet pavement of sand, like the unwritten pages of a book. Much has changed and is changing even as I write, but the ordinary people remain the same, simple, naïve and kind, and it is to them I am returning

As I make my way below, the island that is the ship closes in about me, bringing with its folded warmth a delicious sense of escape, of isolation. Faces begin to sort themselves out from among the scurry of passengers looking for their cabins, weeping children clinging to the hand of a worried stewardess, women shrilling over a piece of luggage that has disappeared into the hold, and was distinctly labelled "Wanted on Voyage", and travellers bombarding the officers with questions. Already queues are forming to book tables for meals, while round the sports deck a padre is wheeling his youngest in a perambulator with an abstracted air. Perhaps he has already been asked to conduct the service on Sunday. Prams on a ship somehow convey an air of *opéra bouffe*, and produce on me the same mildly hysterical effect as modern sanitation does on an aeroplane, both giving the impression of "props", ludicrously out of setting. Down on the baggage deck the Alsatian I made friends with on the train whines dismally.

I, being poor, and therefore committed to a gregariousness that I am far from feeling, travel tourist, a misapplication of terms scarcely merited by the bulk of the passengers. Down on C deck, which seems to me to be lost in the bowels of the ship, until I subsequently discover that there is also a D deck, I accept not only the fact that I am sharing a cabin with three others of my sex, but that two of them, owing to one of those inexplicable whims of Fate, are the largest women I have ever set eyes on off the stage of the Berlin Opera House during a season of Wagner. The cabin, which in the ship's illustrated brochure looked neat, compact, and adequately spacious, appears to have shrunk; and wedged immovable around a mountain of baggage four strange English-women (I hasten to amend with true native pride that one of them is a Scot) regard each other with only mildly disguised hostility. The situation is rendered even more delicate by the presence of no less than three large and expensive-looking florist's boxes, and a neat wad of telegrams and cables, surmounting like a challenge the pyramid of our combined effects.

To my quite genuine surprise, they are all for me, and I unwrap sheaves of blue iris, heavy-headed tulips and pink carnations in a mist of maidenhair fern from their cellophane, murmuring deprecating phrases under the concentrated gaze of three pairs of disapproving and incredulous eyes. The disposal of the luggage thus laid bare is obviously about to arouse controversy, so, beating a cowardly retreat, I climb over the remainder of the holdalls and grips in the passage-way and flee in search of tea.

The decks are almost deserted, and the damp winter twilight has merged sea and sky into one. Out of the darkness that stretches off into infinity around us, small lights dip and hover; the low rolling shape of a tanker on her way home, and, far off, a sister passenger ship, the winking line of her portholes tilting gently with the freshening sea.

The English are never more class-conscious than when they are abroad, and in Eastern countries particularly this is carried to the point of absurdity. With every stroke of the engine that bears them further away from the cosy intimacy of Fuller's, they grow less inclined to rub shoulders with those who have been mystically transformed by a change of climate into social outcasts.

There are two classes on the ship, first and tourist, and no

herd of sheep or goats was ever divided by so great a gulf. The first-class passengers are a mere handful who spend much of their time gazing down from the sanctity of the top deck on the piquantly heterogenous collection below them. Among us, the lower stratum, easily the most exciting group on board is a company of American Negro variety artists bound for Ceylon, to perform at the Centenary celebrations. The girls, the result of a mingling of many races, vary from dusky brown to warm olive, and are bizarre, exotic, and incredibly lovely. The men are more wholly Negroid, with enormous wide shoulders and sinuous hips, and their combined dancing makes us all seem like clumsy amateurs. They are creatures of moods, in turns childishly gay and wildly riotous or plunged into an abysmal melancholy. Their clothes are expensive, utterly unsuitable, but oh so decorative, and on the sculptured bronze of their firm young bodies brilliantly and flamboyantly right.

There is the usual sprinkling of pale and enervated curates and their thin, harassed wives, the life drained out of them by a succession of babies and Institute meetings, and the constant effort demanded by a practical demonstration of the miracle of the widow's cruse on a twentieth-century curate's stipend. Little bands of Indians and Pakistanis huddle in corners, green with cold and the first onset of sea-sickness.

Below I find I am sharing a table with a jovial, red-bearded Dutch Catholic Father, returning to the Frontier to do another spell of ten years, and an extremely soigné young Pakistani, straight from a distinguished career at Edinburgh University and destined for the Foreign Service. At the table next to mine are four jolly and mysterious gentlemen from Lyallpur in the Punjab, who eat their way solidly through course after course, insist on conducting long conversations with me in Urdu, describing in detail what they think of Glasgow and Scottish weather, and heartily invite me to stay with all four of them at Lyallpur.

After a few days there emerges an excessively mournful little man from Hazara, whose brothers, being Pathans and sensible opportunists, have taken advantage of his prolonged absence over the years to parcel out his lands between them, and who has in the hold a few dozen cases of bicycles, over whose potential Customs duty he broods endlessly and pessimistically in the most

execrable English with a broad Manchester accent. I try him with some Pushtu, but he has forgotten even that, and remains stranded unhappily between two worlds.

On the second day out we plunge suddenly into heavy seas. Great translucent green rollers rise like shining walls around us, and for days those of us who have not retired miserably to our bunks stagger round the decks, clinging to an intricate spider's web of safety ropes and the strong arms of nicely-balanced stewards. The dining-room empties as though by magic and the tilted, slippery wave-washed decks, that angle upwards only to fall away alarmingly from under one's feet, are deserted. By the time we reach Gibraltar, however, the majority are able to stagger ashore, and wander delightedly amid a cluster of tiny houses, piled one on top of the other in shades of pale pink, yellow, cerulean and cream, spilling down to the harbour like gigantic chunks of Turkish Delight, while, behind, the grim, historic rock slants upwards against the skyline.

We reach Port Said at night, anchoring off the harbour in an atmosphere of armed neutrality, for the Canal Zone has erupted like a volcano and wild rumours are flying. I miss the customary jaunt ashore and the first whiff of the East that greets the traveller from the moment he steps out of the dirty little launch and is suddenly cast, like Daniel, into the hungry clamour of Port Said's pavement spivs. I miss its feathery palm trees, the high houses with their layers of balconies festooned with mattresses, bedding, carpets and dirty washing; the green-tiled cupolas of the white Customs buildings, and the slender minarets of mosques rising out of a labyrinth of evil-smelling alleys, where touts and beggars sell everything from loaded sticks to pornographic post-cards and opium, and women go about shrouded like black spindles, with an entrancing gold nose-piece and astonishing openwork black silk stockings.

Now it is all hidden and asleep in the velvet darkness somewhere across the water. It is a night of dancing lights, scattered like wet sequins in the diamond-patterned anchorage. Slowly other ships pass us and disappear into the black tunnel of the Canal; obediently we slip into place, the lights are left behind, and we awake in the morning with armed gun-posts on one side and a herd of Arabian camels on the other.

The nights become tropical, and with the rising temperature the Blackbirds even more volatile, and occasional muffled screams and the thud of padding feet disturb our slumber. They live in a constant state of tension which has a strange effect on the ship, rather like an electric current passing through our midst. One night, during a combined dance, a young man from the first class insults a lady from the tourist section, and there is no end of righteous indignation, especially from the Indian and Pakistani contingent. Next morning a petition goes up to the Captain, presented by a rotund and majestic Sinhalese gentleman, demanding that the first-class passengers be forbidden the lower decks. A ludicrous and childish reversal of natural ethics.

At Aden, I flatly refuse to go ashore. Nevertheless, at 3.a.m. I find myself standing with Father X and Maqbool, my table companions, on the gangway in brilliant moonlight, amid a wild cacophony of hoarse voices calling from the tiny launches, bobbing like a miniature flotilla round the ship's side. Ashore we pile into a 1949 Rolls taxi which bears us off with reckless speed to the Arab city, six miles from the harbour. Whirling round a series of hairpin bends, the driver insists, with morbid delight, on pointing out the various cemeteries of which there seem to be an unnatural preponderance. His finger shoots out again—the English R.A.F. Cemetery, the Jewish Cemetery. We cannot possibly see in the darkness and we take his word, but our reception of the whereabouts of the Muslim Cemetery is definitely cold.

We draw up in near darkness in a wide street with the dim shapes of goats huddled on the pavement, and string beds in long lines, their occupants sprawled carelessly in the defenceless absurdity of sleep. Over our heads bats the size of swallows circle continuously with their strange, ragged flight. A small open sports car roars up and we realize we have police protection. Shops open up for our visit, and, as soon as we have gone, put up their shutters and go back to sleep. The sky breaks, the stars pale and fade, and a slow dawn wakens the town.

Teashops start their small fires, stretching back into infinity, long and narrow, often painted indigo with a crude conventional dado round the walls, a heap of eggshells in front of the doorway. We drink sweet, hot tea, watched by a crowd who gather with

unabashed curiosity. A cyclist out of tempo with the leisure of the morning knocks down a small boy and passes on. Nobody pays the least attention. A Brahmini cow lies on the pavement chewing meditatively. A couple of tired camel caravans from Arabia sway past two or three goats, their udders tied up in brightly-coloured calico bags. Houses jut, climb, slope and slant towards each other, their interiors like shells, with possibly only a bed, a rough sideboard and an odd box. There seem to be innumerable cats with small triangular, lynx-like faces. Below the old city, dug into the hillside, are the cave-dwellers, burrowing in and out of tiny cabins, indescribably squalid, diseased and miserable.

Out in the Gulf of Aden comes the news of the King's death, the sense of tragedy and the sadness of his passing made even more poignant by the burning sun and the smiling Arabian Sea ahead of us. Even the Pakistanis who have been most vehement in their criticism of British Imperialism gravely attend the simple service, and there is not one who does not express his sympathy in one way or another. The gentlemen from Lyallpur agree with one accord that they would like the British back again. They are not interested in politics, or in any of the high-sounding dogmas of freedom, nationalism and an Islamic state. They want to see the people able to buy food and clothing, and wheat at six rupees a maund.

I asked my young college friend about it all. "Criticize the Muslims as much as you like," he said, "but don't blame it on Islam. You see," he went on half-apologetically, "we have all got such an inferiority complex because of lack of education, inexperience in administration, and the attitude adopted towards us for years by your people, who regarded us simply as natives. The men weren't so bad—we loved and respected the great majority—but the English *mem-sahibs*——" he smiled ruefully.

"But surely we weren't responsible for your lack of education?" I asked. "What was to prevent your rich landowners from sending their sons to good schools, or even abroad for training, so that they could prepare to take part in the government of their country?"

"Look," he replied. "I'll tell you the reason. We are lazy, fundamentally lazy. We are content with what we have to-day, and trust in Allah for to-morrow. We have been a nation of small

farmers—just as you are a nation of shopkeepers"—he laughed mischievously—"with no other ambition than to have enough to eat, a wife, a buffalo, and tobacco for our hookahs. The British and the Hindus ran the country, but that was as it had always been. Now we have suddenly been thrust into an authority for which we are not even fitted by nature, and we are like a lot of small boys learning to ride bicycles and showing off like mad all the time. We must put up a façade of efficiency, with no mistakes admitted, that not even a seasoned, mature administration would pretend to."

As we hang over the rail, watching the new capital of Pakistan taking shape and form in the distance, I ponder over his words. Are we indeed responsible for a nation's outlook? Have they gained or lost by our so-called occupation? That is a question that somehow must be solved on my travels. At the moment I feel rather like a fond and puzzled parent when the psychologist tells her that the reason behind the bad behaviour of her offspring is some trauma of early infancy. . . . I wonder. . . .



Chapter 2

KARACHI

JUST over the ship's side, sprawled across the Indus Delta, and spreading inland into the flat, bare desert of Sind, lies Karachi; city of camel caravans and streamlined American cars, of donkeys, horse-drawn victorias and rattling buses and trams. In her harbour liners lie, surrounded by the sails of fishing boats, the design of which has remained almost unchanged since the days of the Phœnician traders. New buildings and factories in ferro-concrete reach for the sky, human beings swarming like ants over their skeleton framework; hundreds of hands shuttling up and down the bamboo scaffolding, passing with unbroken rhythm the tiny baskets of sand and cement.

Scavenger kites drift all day above the houses, like great scraps of burnt paper, while above them passenger planes come in to land from every corner of the globe. Expensive hotels lie only a stone's-throw from the miserable hovels of the refugees. The streets are thronged with business-men; Pathans from the North-West Frontier, with their unmistakable swagger and distinctive headdress; clusters of *meghars*, the men and women employed on the building operations, splashed across the pavement like brilliant exotic flowers; Sindhis and Punjabis—between whom there is a deadly enmity—in fact, the story goes that a Punjabi, once asked which, on meeting a cobra and a Sindhi, he would kill first, replied promptly, "The Sindhi", and even in hospital it is unwise to have both in the same ward. Be that as it may, all races and sects mingle in the crowded, noisy thoroughfares, dodging the cycle rickshaws, the ancient rattling trams and the long lines of swarthy Kabuli camel-drivers with their flat camel carts. A young man about town

in a Western lounge suit strolls past, his wife stumbling along a few paces behind him—the required number is ten by orthodox Muslims of the old school—hidden from head to foot in the voluminous, tent-like *burqa*, symbol of *purdah*.

Camels are everywhere; black ones shorn of hair and shining with oil; thick-necked, woolly, short-legged fellows from Afghanistan, and tall, elegant, neat-headed females from Sind and the Makran, their young ones prancing stiff-kneed and springy at their heels. Strung nose to tail, their throats adorned with necklaces of turquoise beads, the triangular saddle sewn with shells, they carry immense loads of fodder roped fanwise over their backs, looking for all the world like grotesque, fantastic peacocks, and the air is hung from morning till night with the tinkle of their bells. The use of the cowrie shell in decoration, and not only of camels, is strange in a land the major portion of which is far from any sea. As far up as Kafiristan the women ornament their hats with rows of these shells, and a visitor who lays in a good supply in Peshawar is sure of an enthusiastic welcome. If one is inclined to fantasy, a peculiar ethnological significance can be drawn from the use of the sea-shell in a country that once lay under the Tethys Sea, and only emerged from its aqueous existence during the Pliocene Age, when, after a series of prolonged upheavals, the earth gave birth to the giant bulk of the Himalayas and the Tethys Sea gradually receded from the land that is now Pakistan.

From a tiny cluster of fishermen's huts, known to the traders of the early eighteenth century as Kalachi, "Land of the Sand Dunes", has sprung the federal capital of Pakistan, youngest member of the Commonwealth, and fifth largest state in the world. The start of Karachi's development as a port and industrial centre was begun as far back as 1729, by an enterprising business magnate from the neighbouring state of Kalat, but long before that Master John Newbury was writing to William Harebourne from Balsara in 1583 that from Syndye, also spelt Cinde, Sindu, Scinde, Cindy, the port of Diul-Sindi on a mouth of the Indus near Laribundar or Karachi, came Venetians from Ormus: "their conducts [the goods conveyed by them] are twenty bales of Turbith, Cloves and Cinnamon and Long Pepper and Musk, Pearls and Feathers; which feathers came from a city called

Syndye, about one hundred and sixty leagues from Ormus, and are very much esteemed in Italy."

Much later, during British occupation, Karachi grew in importance and became the capital of the Province of Sind. These were the days of the great Sir Charles Napier, into whose mouth *Punch* put the immortal words: "*Peccavi*—I have Scinde." It was not, however, till the establishment of Pakistan as a separate entity at the division of the subcontinent in 1947 that Karachi began to make her greatest progress. Once the city occupied an area of only twenty-four acres, with a population of 1,200. Before Partition, the number of inhabitants had grown to 450,000, but within the space of only five years it has rocketed up to well over a million, and the town itself has spread out over an area of seventy-one square miles.

The immediate problem that now confronted me was where to stay. From scraps of conversation gleaned on the ship I gathered that the few luxury hotels were far above my purse. It was here that my friend Ishaq Mir came into the picture. He was a rather shady-looking cloth merchant from Khairpur, and deeply interested in my journey, for which he immediately offered himself as escort.

There was no doubt that Ishaq Mir knew his Frontier; indeed, his intimate familiarity with its lesser-known borders bore in on me the conclusion that his frequent journeys north were not all simple hunting trips. He seemed to have friends in the most obscure places, and discoursed at length, in the incongruously bourgeois setting of the tourist lounge, on the properties of the shahtoot tree, on the leaves of which he alleged silkworms could be bred; on a precious stone found only on the slopes of Nanga Parbat; on the plant from which Santonin is obtained, growing wild in Hunza; *yunani tibbi*, or herbalist medicine; and waxed so lyrical about the rare baum-marten, whose habitat he knew, that I already had visions of myself returning with at least a handsome stole.

To him I confided my problem of how to find a cheap hotel, and perhaps, as I was inclined to wonder afterwards, I overdid the emphasis on the cheapness; however, he assured me that a friend who was meeting the ship would undoubtedly be able to



Concreting a roof: women carry baskets of cement balanced on their heads



An elegant, neat-headed female from the Makran

direct me to a suitable lodging. In due course, a large suave and portly figure, obviously a person of some importance, for the ship's bar was opened specially for him, greeted me like a long-lost friend. We sauntered off the ship together (once his thirst was quenched), and were miraculously and swiftly whisked through the Customs without the least check on our baggage, and transferred to a large and expensive-looking car. By this time I was not at all sure that Mahboob Pir's idea of a cheap hotel would be mine, but fortunately I held my tongue.

With a great deal of noise, for the driver simply kept one finger permanently pressed on the horn, rendering all conversation impossible, we finally turned off the main road, and after squeezing a passage through a maze of crowded back alleys drew up with a jerk and a screech of brakes in front of a single narrow doorway, above which an ancient wooden signboard, the paint flaking off its sun-bleached surface, announced in white letters on a green ground . . . KASHMIR HOTEL.

Whether it owed its name to the sentimental attachment of some homesick Kashmiri for his native land, or whether it had simply been named thus by an astute landlord with his tongue in his cheek and an eye on his mail bookings, I shall never know, but it was as far removed in *milieu* and appearance from the snow-capped peaks of Mount Mahadeo and Shalamar, the "Abode of Love" of Parvarsena, as a dingy, soot-encrusted villa in an industrial town, bearing on its glass fanlight "Glen Orchy", is from its Highland namesake.

Meanwhile, Ishaq and Mahboob had disappeared inside, to emerge some appreciable time later to inform me rather hesitatingly that there was a room, but they didn't know whether it would be good enough. Anxious not to appear unduly fussy or ungrateful, I assured them that my experiences on the Frontier had inured me to sleeping anywhere, and on discovering that I could do so here for the infinitesimal sum of four rupees a night, I firmly stepped out of the car and clinched the bargain.

The building itself seemed to be flanked on all sides by yards and warehouses. In many of these empty spaces the refugees had established themselves, and along the entire length of the opposite side of my narrow street were their pitiful

shacks of coconut matting hanging in shreds, thin plywood, tattered sacking—anything that would afford the privacy of four walls. Conditions were worse than insanitary. There are no adequate washing facilities for people whose back wall is that of a building, and whose only table is the window-ledge behind them.

Ever since Partition they have streamed across the border, almost without ceasing, and it is impossible not to gaze horrified at the thin children in filthy rags playing amid the stench of urine, dirt and dung, or the little groups of hopeless, apathetic women sitting by the roadside, searching each other's head for lice. Human beings sleep on the pavement, rolled-up, cocoon-like figures, poignantly reminiscent of Henry Moore's "Shelter Notebook". Some of the more enterprising, by erecting a shelter and placing a few *charpoys* in rows, have made of this an open-air lodging-house and charge eight annas a night for the privilege of sleeping literally on the street. The close proximity in which animals and human beings live, eat, sleep and have their being adds enormously to the spread of disease and the difficulty of keeping the streets clean, to say nothing of the perils of walking home at night.

I was led up a single, dark stairway, at the bottom of which, in a kind of cupboard, slept the Pathan *chaukidar* or watchman, one Mohammad Khan from a little village I knew near Kohat, and with whom I eventually established a firm friendship. The steep stone treads wound past the hotel office, euphemistically labelled "Reception", and emerged on a veranda running round three sides of a square. Below was a flagged courtyard, its uneven surface punctuated at intervals by a few spotted iron tables and one or two sad and dusty-looking shrubs. My guide led me into a kind of hall, down both walls of which ran a series of cubicles.

Flinging open a door with all the obsequiousness of an hotelier at the Ritz, he ushered me with a flow of deprecations and polite nothings into one of these cells. It was a tiny room, not more than ten feet square, whose walls stopped about six feet from the ceiling. Inside was a hallstand with a fly-blown mirror, such as one meets in every Bloomsbury boarding-house, a bed, a table and a chair. My windows looked out on to the common veranda,

so that if I desired privacy I was forced to close the wooden shutters, for curtains there were none.

Outside the sleeping hall, a partition across the veranda divided my bachelor quarters from the family ones, and each day I was forced to invade their privacy in order to reach the women's washing-place. There was a solitary hand-basin planted on the wall in the middle of the veranda, and here I did my washing, invariably surrounded by women and small girls, entranced and mystified by my packet of Lux. Each time the foamy suds bubbled up in the water they shrieked with delight, and I still think they regarded it not as mere soap, but as some magical device, dangerous but pleasantly exciting. They were deeply interested in my clothes, my toothbrush and toothpaste, and no matter how carefully I stole along thinking that I would be unobserved, doors opened and "chicks" were drawn aside, and out they poured to watch the fun. Lavatories and showers they were all too obviously unfamiliar with, and the Kashmir Hotel's row of dark and evil-smelling boxes, overrun with great cockroaches, were a continual source of agony and torment to me.

My fellow guests were courteous and kind, and so astonished at my presence among them that one by one they all came to call. Little notes arrived beginning "Honoured Madam", and they hastened to offer information or hospitality. Next door to me was Salim Khalil, an earnest, middle-aged Punjabi wearing a constant expression of worry and perplexity on his round, creased face, due no doubt to the fact that he was engaged, morning noon and night, in the task of compiling a trade directory of the Punjab, a complimentary copy of which, duly signed, was presented to me before my departure. It was without doubt his *magnum opus*, and when he discovered that I too was writing a book his delight knew no bounds, and as a fellow author he inundated me with advice and warnings.

Opposite me resided the star guest of the hotel, one Professor Habibullah, whose continual comings and goings were a source of mystery and speculation to the rest of us. He was always dressed in an immaculate beige *achkan* (the long, fitted coat) and spotless white *shalwar*, and wore his Karaculi Jinnah cap at a rakish angle. His whole appearance, his unnaturally black carefully-trimmed

moustache, the curved line of his ample stomach, and his small beady eyes conveyed much more the impression of the *bon viveur* than the literary ascetic. He had, however, we learned, held a number of important appointments in the state, and was now involved in a complicated intrigue to obtain yet another. How he had lost his previous position it would have been indelicate to inquire, but we gathered that a slight disagreement with his immediate superiors over some trifling point of administration had been the cause of his summary dismissal from office—that and, of course, natural jealousy of his many qualifications. Indeed, he had an imposing list of degrees after his name, and was constantly dashing off to interviews with influential personages, mostly related to cousins once removed, sheaves of papers and files under his arm. I typed for him several sheets of his official history, and though I still dispute the fact that he could ever see forty-one again, I was amazed that such an eminent man of letters could be so callously overlooked by the various selection boards.

Whenever I opened my shutters, there he was, his large bulk totally blocking the small window-frame. He would lean like Romeo on the sill and inquire tenderly after my health, invite me to tea or to smoke "—— hookah". The adjective with which he qualified all his statements had been acquired I should imagine from close association with the lower ranks of the British Army, and although Swift could write to inform his Stella on May 28, 1711, that "it was Bloody hot walking to-day", the expression is frowned upon in polite society. But it nevertheless remained one of the Professor's pet adjectives; he considered it *de rigueur* in all our conversations and sprinkled it lavishly in every other sentence.

Daily he plagued me with invitations, to Clifton in the moonlight, to lunch at the Beach Luxury Hotel, invitations which in the East are infinitely more difficult to refuse than in the West, where two refusals will constitute a polite but definite "No", accepted without rancour or sense of slight. Finally, I yielded, my resistance quite shattered by his hurt expressions of disappointment, subtly conveying the insinuation that as a *mem-sahib* I considered him unworthy of the honour of my company. The date and hour were fixed, I having treacherously secured the

inclusion of a friend as chaperone, and an elaborate programme was drawn up. Tea at the Beach Luxury Hotel, a walk along Clifton Beach, followed by a drive out to inspect the sacred crocodiles at Mango Pir.

A large car arrived early in the afternoon, begged or borrowed from one of his many influential friends—in view of subsequent events, I cannot imagine that it could have been hired—and off we set. We must, on looking back, have presented a curious trio: the Professor in Sunday, or, rather, Friday, best, presiding like a benevolent deity over the teapot, myself, Scottish, whose association with a male Pakistani would inevitably arouse unkind suspicion and supposition, and the photographer with whom I was collaborating at the time, a barrister and ex-Cambridge graduate. Tea was a slightly strained affair, in spite of the usual request of "No formality, please", for Ronnie sat more or less in stony silence occasionally shooting forth some sardonic remark wholly lost on Habibullah's expansive hospitality, unable to comprehend why I should bother with someone he had mentally labelled as a rogue and an impostor, and our desiccated conversation was punctuated abruptly every now and then by Habibullah's booming adjectives and hearty mirth.

After a dreary trudge over the sands, importuned at every step by small boys urging us to have a joy-ride on one of the many camels parading the beach like donkeys at Margate, we set off for the dusty drive to Mango Pir. Here in a tank about the size of a small swimming-pool are packed a solidly horrifying, nightmare-like mass of long, inert dark shapes, a black snout occasionally breaking the slimy surface. Others sprawl on the banks, dried up like ancient logs, animated only by a tiny wicked eye staring up unblinkingly. Contrary to the legend that these creatures embody the spirits of saints, holy martyrs and prophets, a spirit of evil broods over the place. A fœtid air hangs like a thick cloud above the sacred pool. The keeper of the shrine kilts up his filthy *lungi* and, jumping over the wall, stirs up his charges for the benefit of the spectators hanging over the edge with shivering and gruesome delight. An occasional angry lash of a tail, and a crocodile slips off the bank into the water. On the trees round the shrine flutter bits of rag tied on by pilgrims, and tea and *jelabis*, yellow whorls of glutinous sweetmeats, are sold at ramshackle,

fly-infested stalls. The Professor, thoroughly enjoying himself, throws the keeper some *buckshеesh*, and we hurry him away feeling slightly sick.

My Pathan bearer, Ghul Mahommad, who had drifted up to the Kashmir Hotel one day with a scrap of dirty paper as a reference from a friend of mine on the Frontier, strongly disapproved of our acquaintanceship, and predicted an awful end to it in lurid and imaginative Pushtu. I could always pretend I couldn't understand and endeavoured to discourage such disrespectful gossiping. But one day dark rumours reached me, and a large notice was pasted conspicuously on the Professor's door, a warrant for the recovery of the amount he owed the Kashmir Hotel, which even at four rupees a day must have run into months of free lodging. Ghul Mahommad came swaggering in twisting his fine long moustaches, and, smiling all over, dragged me forth to look at it, pointing out its significance with unholy joy. I never saw the Professor again, and often wondered what became of him and if his debts ever caught him up.

One day I met in the corridor my friend of the ship, the little man from Hazara, gloomier than ever and pining for his beloved Manchester. True to his forebodings, his beautiful bicycles had been seized by the Customs, and the duty he would have to pay in order to redeem them was larger than even he had imagined. He had found himself totally incapable of screwing up his courage to face his brothers and demand his rights, and roamed the building in a misery of indecision.

The nights were almost more than I could bear. None of my fellow occupants seemed to go to bed before the small hours, and when they did snores, coughs, retchings, groans and mutterings rent the air. Occasionally, driven to the point of suicide, I would shout forth all the imprecations I knew in Urdu, which effected a momentary lull, and then it would all begin again.

I hated most being shut in without a view, but in the end I discovered an eyrie from where I could watch and sketch. A tiny balcony jutted out over the street halfway down the main staircase, and, like my Pakistani counterparts, unseen, I could hang over its iron balustrade and watch the world go by. Across the intervening three yards or so was a Victoria stand, the drivers asleep in the hot sun, their feet extended along the backs of the

seats, apparently dead to the world, until, on the emergence of a potential passenger from the hotel, some sixth sense seemed to waken them. When he had disappeared round the corner, deaf to their entreaties, they relapsed into slumber. From my elevation the camels waiting patiently below, wedged with their long carts into the narrow street, took on the appearance of dinosaurs. Men passed hawking *battera* or brilliant green parrots in tiny cages; cycle rickshaws sent pedestrians spinning, their handlebars sparkling with mirrors, bells and coloured baubles; women shuffled along like full-blown poppies, a thin brown wrist thrust out of the folds of a *burqa* revealing a sudden glimpse of a pair of gazelle-like eyes ringed with *surama.*

Two or three yards down the street from my front door was a single latrine for the refugees. Two of its wooden walls lay broken in the road, but nobody bothered to repair it. The sight of these wretched people was to haunt my whole fortnight in the capital. What is being done about the problem? On the face of it a great deal, but it is one thing to be able to solve a problem of fixed magnitude and another to deal with one which continues to grow seemingly without end. New settlements outside Karachi, such as Nazimabad, have been recently constructed, and six more satellite towns are envisaged. With the advent of so many newcomers, Pakistan's unemployment figures are mounting with dangerous rapidity. The refugees still come, and still the provision for them is inadequate. Meanwhile, a tendency creeps in to blame the refugees for everything. "Oh, Karachi was a lovely clean town before the refugees came," "Only those who had nothing to lose came over here at Partition. That was the trouble" or "They don't care about working. They only want to live on charity." That they have undergone unbelievable hardships is irrefutable. That, in some cases, their moral and spiritual values have deteriorated with the lowering of their standard of living is true also. And yet sometimes round my squalid lodging-house there was music in the night, a haunting refrain drifting up with the blue smoke from a dung cooking fire, and a light streaming out of these miserable hovels.



Chapter 3

THE FEAST OF THE RAM

KARACHI was bathed in a sticky veil of heat wafted from the rooftops, thrown up from the pavements, stifling and inescapable. Much of my time was spent planning and tramping wearily through countless offices, trying to wheedle help from well-meaning but apathetic Government officials. Again and again I found that, because of my sex, insuperable obstacles rose in my path. Someone suggested a trip along the Makran coast to write up the story of a shrine in the Hinglaj Gorge on the sluggish Hingol River, one of the only two rivers on that coast to run uninterrupted from source to mouth. The Makran once constituted the ancient bridge between India and the Middle East; Alexander marched through its hinterland, and Assyrians, Sassanians, Seljuks, Arabs and Mongols came and went in what is now part of South Baluchistan. The fishing folk along its coast were Arrian's "Ichthyophagi", "barbarians clothed in the skins of fish or animals, covered with long hair and using their nails as we use fishknives . . . fighting more like monkeys than men."

At the shrine of Kali in the Hinglaj Gorge, lying under the hill of Nani Mai, or Mother Nani, men were worshipping even before the Indo-Aryans sung their Vedic hymns. The strange history of the place promised infinite possibilities, but although the projected feature had been virtually commissioned by a Government-sponsored publication, the difficulties of getting there seemed insurmountable. A friend gave me an introduction to Rear-Admiral Jefford, then supreme Commander of the Pakistan Navy. He was charming, and kindness itself. Yes; he



Salim shampoos the family dhumba, *or fat-tailed sheep, doomed to sacrifice*



Refugees: their only source of livelihood the pedal rickshaw, soon to be banned in Karachi, their only luxury the hookah

could arrange to take me there in a gunboat, but there was no means of getting back. The Fishery Department proposed a fishery-cruiser, but on further investigation I found it as yet unbuilt. I was shown the blueprint, on which I cast a jaundiced eye. And so it went on.

Meanwhile, I got to know something of the world that flowed around my doorstep and of the driftwood lives of the people borne on its tide. On one side of my front door squatted Haseeb, the *pan* and *bidi* wallah, the ground around him splashed with the red juice of the betel nut, a delicacy more widely enjoyed in Bengal than in West Pakistan. Over the border he had owned a little shoemaking business, a house, a bit of land and a wife and three young children. Now everything had gone. For two or three years he had trailed back and forth to the office for the Recovery of Abducted Women, interviewing anyone who had come from his village, following up the tiniest clue. He had made a trip back as a guide once, and had found his brother's wife, but of his own family there was still no trace. His left hand was so bent and twisted as the result of a knife wound that he could no longer hold the last, even if he had been able to find anyone to employ him, so now he made a few annas selling local brands of cigarettes, known as *bidis* and *pan*. Even that was precarious enough, for it was difficult to get the right kind of leaves for *pan* in West Pakistan. At night he simply closed his little box, rolled himself up in his ragged *chaddur*, and slept as close as he could to the wall of the hotel.

On the other side I used to stop and chat with Salim, who was more often than not engaged in washing a young and recalcitrant *dhumba*, or fat-tailed sheep, doomed to slaughter later in the year at the Festival of Id-ul-Azha, or Bakr Id, which falls on the tenth, eleventh and twelfth of the Zul Hijjah month, and during which Muslims venerate the memory of Abraham. Part of the long ritual of the preparations necessitates that the animal, usually a goat or a *dhumba*, depending on the wealth and status of the family, should be brought up as a family pet, so that some of the agony of its slaughter may approximate to the Prophet's pangs of love.

All three of the great monotheistic religions of the world, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, trace their origin from Abraham,

the great patriarch of the Jewish race. Muslims commemorate in this sacred festival the greatest lesson a man can teach, the lesson of self-sacrifice and submission to the will of God. Abraham's whole life was the embodiment of devotion, and the climax was reached when the Lord appeared to him in a dream and demanded of him the supreme sacrifice, the sacrifice of his beloved only son, Isaac. The result of this superlative example of obedience to the Divine Will on the part of both father and son was the command that a ram be substituted for the body of the child lying upon the altar already awaiting the sacrificial knife.

From that day to this, the symbolism of the sacrifice of an animal epitomizes the highest tenets of the Muslim creed, and to every true believer the significance of the offering of an animal, which they have reared in love and tenderness solely for this purpose, amounts to a spiritual transubstantiation of its flesh and blood for the material sacrifice which they are prepared to make, and signifies their readiness to lay down their most prized possession in God's name for a supreme cause. Through this act they dedicate themselves anew to the pursuance of selfless devotion, to the alleviation of suffering, to the good of humanity and the service of their country.

As the great day draws near, men and boys parade their sheep and goats, gay and fantastic now in brilliant colours, chequered and diced in henna, *dhumbas* shorn of their coats, streamlined and slender, carrying their tails like a Victorian lady her bustle; their flanks a mosaic of star and crescent or bearing the name of their owner in Urdu script; fat woolly rams, startling in a blaze of bright, raw, cerise; liver and white goats mincing along to the jingle of the bells garlanding their necks, their bodies grotesquely spattered with daubs of green and puce, wearing elaborate collars of cerulean beads. There is no end to the infinite variety. At every grassy spot, half-naked urchins squat beside them, or collect succulent greenery for the evening meal.

The pale dawn of another Id breaks over the camel-coloured villages of the Frontier hills, the lush green riverlands of the Brahmapootra and the Padma, the fertile meadows of the Punjab veined with her watercourses, and the flat, white Sind Desert. Men rise and prepare for the solemn journey to the mosque for a

service of dedication and promise, and from a thousand minarets the Imam calls the faithful to prayer.

A few months later I celebrated Id in a tiny village in the Salt Range with Mohammad Ijaz and his wife, Anwar. Ijaz was the proprietor of what we would call a general store, selling everything from spices and hurricane lamps to tasselled black wool braids, woven with gold and silver threads, worn by the women to lengthen and decorate their shining plaits. He also owned a sizeable bit of land, where his brothers and mother lived. The whole family had moved in by *tonga* and bullock cart to the village for the celebrations, and while the men were at the mosque we females decked ourselves out in our Id finery. Anwar insisted I should wear *shalwar*, *qamiz*, the baggy trousers and long shirt cut on princess lines, and loaded me with the family jewellery—she even lent me a *burqa* in order that I should not offend her aged mother-in-law's sense of propriety. Although I found it unbearably hot, I had been introduced to its management two years before, and tried to keep as cool as its voluminous folds would allow by fanning myself inside my tent with a raffia fan, which sent them off into peals of laughter. As soon as prayers were over, we all trooped out into the streets, and the tiny village flowered into life, blazing with silver and gold, deep purple, cyclamen and emerald, a tumbled mass of jewelled brilliance under the blue of an Eastern sky. The animals, the sun glinting on their trappings, were led through the streets in a last blaze of glory, Mohammed Abdullah, the eldest of Ijaz' six children, proudly trailing along our own particular offering, who, sublimely unconscious of approaching doom, was bent on securing a mouthful of anything that looked even faintly edible on the road.

The parade over, we left the crowd in little family groups and returned to our own doorstep for the final act. By this time I was hot and dusty and forced to throw back my *burqa* immodestly in order to breathe. The ram's gaudy headdress was unfastened, the star-spangled drapery and the leather collar. Little Ferida whimpered and was nudged sternly by her elder brother. The noise and the clamour and the voices were stilled, and in one moment caught in time, an aura arose like incense, moving with one mass

submission, pregnant with the load of a thousand unknown years. The knife flashed in the sunlight, and in the red blood flowed a distillation of the spirit of Abraham, of Isaac, and of all the countless saints and martyrs, heroes and prophets.

Then and then only were the people released into the joy of carnival. The meat was apportioned, one-third to the poor, one-third to friends and the remainder for the family. Stalls had been erected in every open space under gay canopies and booths groaned under their load of sweetmeats.

All over Pakistan the scene repeats itself in a panorama of rejoicing. In the rocky Khyber hills the air is strung with greetings in harsh, guttural Pushtu: "*Id mubarik*" ("Happy Id") is shouted and called to every friend or passerby. Tribesmen swagger in all the glory of starched *lungi* and new gold *kullah*, a bandolier slung across an embroidered waistcoat. A small boy fires a *feu de joie* from a high watch-tower and men whirl like dervishes to the wild music of the Khattack dances. The nomadic desert tribes of Cholistan have wandered in to some desert shrine in long, swaying caravans of elaborately-decorated camels, the *kachva*, or carrier, on their backs lined with coloured *razai* and brimming over with women and children, incredibly vivid and lovely against the flat greyness of the desert sand.

In the country districts of the Punjab, men, their wives riding pillion, canter along canal banks and through the waving grasses on gay, country-bred mares, a foal prancing at their heels, looking like something out of *The Arabian Nights*; riding with an easy natural grace, a scarlet *dopatta* streaming out like a pennant against the skyline. Two men manœuvre a pair of white oxen down a narrow street, the beasts' great necks hung with a chain of leaves in beaten brass, while a bevy of small girls watch, breathless in the splendour of their new clothes, with shining blue black hair, and jingling bracelets on wrists and ankles.

The first day ends, and the blue smoke spirals upwards and is lost in the night sky. The poor have been fed, the gifts have been exchanged and every man has called his neighbour brother. The skin of the ram is stretched out to dry, still wearing its hennaed pattern, but the word of the Prophet has been heard in the land "It is not their meat", says the Quran, "not their blood that

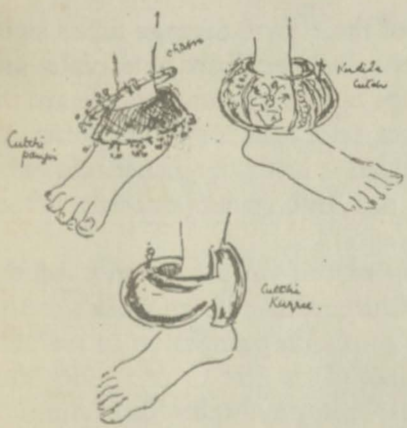
reaches God; it is the spirit of piety (and discipline which you derive by sacrifice) that reaches Him."

As I watch the little boy scrubbing away beside the running tap, I feel a lump in my throat at the thought of his misery to be and at the amazing and unbelievable difference between the East and the West, and the deliberate evocation of so much primitive emotion. Picturesque it may be, and praiseworthy in its spirit, but the destruction of a child's pet is apt to loom larger on our horizons than the monumental symbolism of its sacrifice.

A few days after my arrival, I visited a new housing estate on the outskirts of Karachi, where I scaled with difficulty the fragile scaffolding and sketched the men and women at work. These families of *meghars*, as they are called, come from Kathiawar in Cutch, and are engaged by the contractor responsible for the actual building operations on a piecework basis. Whole families settle round the building for the day, the bigger children looking after the babies. If they become too obstreperous, Mother will take a few moments off to feed them, plant them nonchalantly in the arms of their but slightly bigger brother or sister, and carry on with the work.

They still retain their picturesque and colourful native dress, although the rich reds of the cotton have taken on a soft and mellow patina with age and much washing. The women, walking on narrow planks round the roof in an unbroken circle, flat baskets balanced on the small, padded rings they wear on their heads, move like a Greek frieze against the skyline, throwing the cement into the prepared framework, where it is trowelled flat and smooth by the men. They wear a backless bodice with tiny sleeves, sweeping flounced skirts kilted like a petticoat, their slender ankles, wrists and throats heavy with silver ornaments. Over their heads is a veil, or *dopatti*, tucked in at the waist for greater freedom, its flowing draperies caught in the slight breeze, billowing out behind in plastic curves like Winged Victories, each movement sheer poetry. I remember greeting the contractor first in order to ask his permission for the sketches. He was a fine old gentleman with a venerable beard, Jinnah cap, flying shirt tails and baggy *shalwar*, and turned out to be a graduate of Edinburgh University.

But Karachi has another life, a strange underwater current of culture, sealed off as it were beneath the brittle and often sordid façade of its daily struggle for existence. There are young men who meet in cafés in the evenings to drink endless cups of coffee and whisky of some unknown brand out of a teapot, and talk and plan and dream. A little group of them, like Aziz, Abu or Salim, have studied abroad, and, like caged animals having once tasted freedom, they pace the confines of their limited existence, pining with a great nostalgia for the days they spent perhaps at Oxford or Cambridge, or in London, consorting with poets and writers. Some have known MacNeice and Spender, quote T. S. Eliot, or, like Aziz, Baudelaire in the original French or Rilke in German. Some of them are Government servants for whom there is no escape. Others, like the man in the Bible, have married a wife, therefore they cannot go. I spent long hours listening and learning, walking up and down the sands at Clifton in the cool of the evening or drinking coffee in a smoke-filled room, unable to offer either help or advice. I learned not to ask why they couldn't write for their own papers, or to hold out hope for them in other countries, this strange collection of near-intellectuals, of half-starved young men who write speeches and reports for important citizens who are either too lazy or too incompetent to write them for themselves, and receive a mere pittance for their work; journalists starving because they are never paid or paid so little that it is not worth the effort—they have no redress; any complaints and the Editor would turn them down altogether. There was among this strange assortment a kind of camaraderie, it was a secret brotherhood of those who had assimilated the values of the West, but were powerless to apply them in the midst of the raw newness of a country still struggling in the bewildering throes of adolescence.



Chapter 4

THE KING OF BABA ISLAND

IT was while I was still in Karachi that I came across the King of Baba Island. It is strange with what glamour imagination has invested the tiniest island, and how great a part islands have played in history, poetry and legend. Since the days when Leander swam the Hellespont, St. Columba landed on Iona, and the ancients believed that beyond the Shetlands stretched incalculable space and called them Ultima Thule—the End of the World—a piece of earth entirely surrounded by sea has acquired a mystery, a fascination that no strip of land-locked territory could ever hold.

Islanders are naturally regarded by the folk on the mainland as a little fey, even as foreigners. They have a long kinship with the tides, reaching back into the caves and recesses of man's memory, with Atlantis and the shores of Oceanus. The sea, like the white circle drawn by a magician's wand, preserves inviolate within its tidal arms the culture of its people and their racial grouping, undisturbed perhaps for centuries, save when a ship, wrecked on its shores, or an invading army, grafts a new shoot on its ancient tree, as it has done in the Shetlands, whose people were first Pict, then Norse, with a dark strain, still noticeable in the south of the islands, born of a stranded Spanish merchantman.

Karachi has her islands, too, scattered along the littoral and sprinkled over the wide Indus Delta. Small and perfectly flat, in some cases little more than sandbanks, with a crest of waving reeds and sea-grass binding the grey sand, most of them are the home of sea-birds only. They lie on the surface like water-lily leaves, each ringed with its lace-edge of foam-flecked beaches, and

have a whole exotic natural life of their own. Strange fishes swim off their coasts, in the shallows splash brilliant blue crabs and lobsters, and piled in silvery heaps beside a fishing village are the flaky shells of windowpane oysters, once used for making buttons. The inhabited islands are peopled mostly by fisherfolk, who have descended either from the old Arab traders or settlers from the great Rann of Cutch.

I was sitting one day sunning myself on the veranda of the picturesque little Karachi Yacht Club, resting after a week's round of officialdom and weary battles to obtain permission to see all I wanted to see, involving countless visits first to one office and then another. The Club lies on an infinitesimal spit of land running out to sea from the West Wharf, is all maps and charts, ship's lanterns and yachting caps, and still rigidly and exclusively British. Sleek racing yachts bobbed at their anchors, *tindals* busy polishing the already shining brasswork, elegant masts like slender antennæ thrusting upwards into the unbroken blue of an Eastern sky; sails spread out on shore being repaired by the sail-makers, while from behind came the staccato notes of hammers on wooden keels, as a new boat was laid down. Tomtits were being rigged for the afternoon's racing, while children played on the sand with little tinkling shrieks of delight as they caught minute, struggling fish in the shallow waters. Offshore the *bunder* boats plied, carrying cargoes brilliant as flower beds, great triangular red and brown sails curved like crescent moons bellying in the breeze. Long, low outriggers sped by, or small fishing craft, three men perched on a plank thrust precariously out over the water, balancing the one vast sail. Country craft, like the *kelegs* of the Persian Gulf, rode high in the water, with a great swoop of prow and stern and rounded hull, faintly reminiscent of tapestried galleons.

Gazing across the swift-flowing Baba Channel to the two low-lying islands ringed with boats, I idly inquired their names. "Oh, that's where the King of Baba Island lives," my hostess explained. The name caught my imagination and at once invested the island with a kind of fairy-tale glamour.

Over these two small, flat and insignificant strips of land, known as Bhit and Baba Islands, raised out of the sea only a matter of a few feet, rules Haji Mohammed Abdulla Bhatti—



Off Karachi Harbour: the graceful masts of fishing boats



The King of Baba Island

indeed, Bhit Island is a corruption of the family name of Bhatti—and holds undisputed sway over his small kingdom. His nine sons, or at least those who have reached the years of discretion, constitute the government, help to run the family business and look after the hospital and the schools. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown", but the Haji Sahib's red fez sits jauntily on his white hair, and his worries mostly consist of a continual battle with the port authorities over the erection of a breakwater, not only to prevent the islands from being gradually eaten away by the swift channel currents, but, logically enough, to ensure that Karachi's harbour will not in consequence become gradually silted up with the displaced soil.

My first meeting with Mohammed Abdulla Bhatti took place most awkwardly in midstream, I on my way out to the islands, and the King on his launch coming in as usual to his office in the city. The boats hove to, the Haji Sahib greeted me courteously, and stepped nimbly aboard the private *bunder* boat where I was sitting in solitary state in the red-cushioned stern. Now well over eighty years of age, Mohammed Abdulla Bhatti still disposes of four raw eggs for breakfast and neither smokes nor drinks. Standing over six feet, with a straight, proud carriage and neatly trimmed white beard, he is an impressive figure. He has enjoyed the varying attractions of no less than seven wives, three of whom are now dead, and the ages of his sons range from well over fifty to an infant of two years. He insisted on my accompanying him back to Karachi and to his office, to which we sped in a large and luxurious car. He ran up the four flights of stairs like a young man, and I had to make a supreme effort to keep up with him.

His feats of strength and endurance are legendary, and it is only fifteen years since, at the sprightly age of seventy, when most people are accepted as having at least one foot in the grave, he swam the channel between Karachi and the islands. Apparently in his youth this was a common practice, and on this occasion, no boat being available, he simply swam home. He treasures an imposing collection of medals for life-saving from the Humane Society, the Royal Life Saving Society, and medals presented to him by grateful governments and the people of Karachi. It was a British Commissioner, I believe, who many years ago first bestowed on him the title of King of Baba Island. Whether this

was done in friendly banter or in complimentary acknowledgement of his leadership and work for the islanders it seemed undiplomatic to inquire, but the title has remained, and Haji Mohammed Abdulla Bhatti bears it proudly. He has a natural grace, and dispensed tea and cakes with an old-world courtesy and charm that was wholly delightful. The twinkle in his eye remained an indication that he was still alert to the delights of female company, and indeed led me to wonder if he might not even then be contemplating the taking of yet another wife to his patriarchal bosom.

One of his most precious possessions after his row of medals was a small school exercise book, which held within its paper covers, written closely in Urdu script, the story of his life. A crony of his, equally venerable but not nearly so spry, had been hastily summoned into the Royal presence to translate the document into English for me. After a formal introduction and an exchange of pleasantries, the old man confessed that he had forgotten his glasses, but that he would do his best. Peering at the book, he would stumble over the beginning of a paragraph slightly, then, obviously remembering the story, race towards its close. He invested each incident with a personal touch and was always reminding me of the signal services that his friend had rendered to humanity. Meanwhile, Abdulla, whose knowledge of English was, I think, quite sufficient to follow the main drift, listened intently to make sure that nothing was left out. He pounced unmercifully on any error, and interrupted shamelessly if he thought that his friend was not doing full justice to the story or missing any of the vital points. Any special passage he would relate to me in Urdu.

It was a strange experience, sitting there in that quiet office, high above the noise of the bazaar, listening to these two old men, so different in character and presence, threading their way about the past with the needle-sure memory of the old. The year, the day, even the state of the weather, down to the smallest detail—it was impossible to stem the flow; and it was equally obvious that they expected me to write down the whole thing, word for word. Should I stop writing for one second, there were anxious looks and polite queries as to whether I had missed an important sentence.

The story began seventy-five years ago, when out of the Rann

of Cutch trekked a little band of people, led by one Haji Omer Bhatti. Omer Bhatti had fulfilled the desire of all good Muslims —had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Holy City—and was therefore entitled to the prefix Haji. Now times were hard and there was no work in Cutch, and so along with about fifty followers he set out to try his fortune elsewhere. None of them possessed more than ten or fifteen rupees, and although a rupee in those days went a long way further than it does now, it must have meant very meagre living. Along with Omer Bhatti went his little son, Mohammed Abdulla, then about ten years of age. It may have been difficult to find somewhere to live, and, being seafaring folk, perhaps the two uninhabited islands lying off Karachi appealed to them, for it was there that they finally settled and there that their descendents live to-day.

At first it was a hard struggle, but fortune in the shape of the proverbial ill wind blew a Parsee ship aground off the coast of Sind. All efforts of the Karachi salvaging firms failed to dislodge her and she was in danger of becoming a total loss. The Bhattis obtained permission to make a last effort and succeeded in salvaging the ship. With the money they made, they invested in two or three country craft, with which they began trading between Karachi and Basra. After this incident their fortune was made and ship after ship was salvaged. In 1902 a deep cyclone hit the islands and the Bhatti family were the means of saving more than a hundred souls from Baba Island, which was almost totally submerged.

Then came the 1914 War, when the Karachi captains were all afraid to book freight to Basra. The Bhattis volunteered with characteristic courage and carried on throughout the war. After the death of his father, Mohammed Abdulla took over the family business. He had served his apprenticeship, and his experience and almost uncanny knack of solving any problem connected with the sea soon earned him a reputation. At one time, a milk lorry trying to cross the Lyari River between Mango Pir and Karachi stuck in midstream. The river was swollen with flood water, which was increasing in violence every minute. Hundreds of people stood helplessly on its banks, watching the terrified occupants signalling frantically for help. In the end, Mohammed Bhatti was called to the scene. He and one of his sons plunged

into the angry river, carrying lifebelts with them, and succeeded in rescuing the entire lorry-load of people. For this gallant action he was rewarded by the British Government with a grant of land and a substantial sum of money.

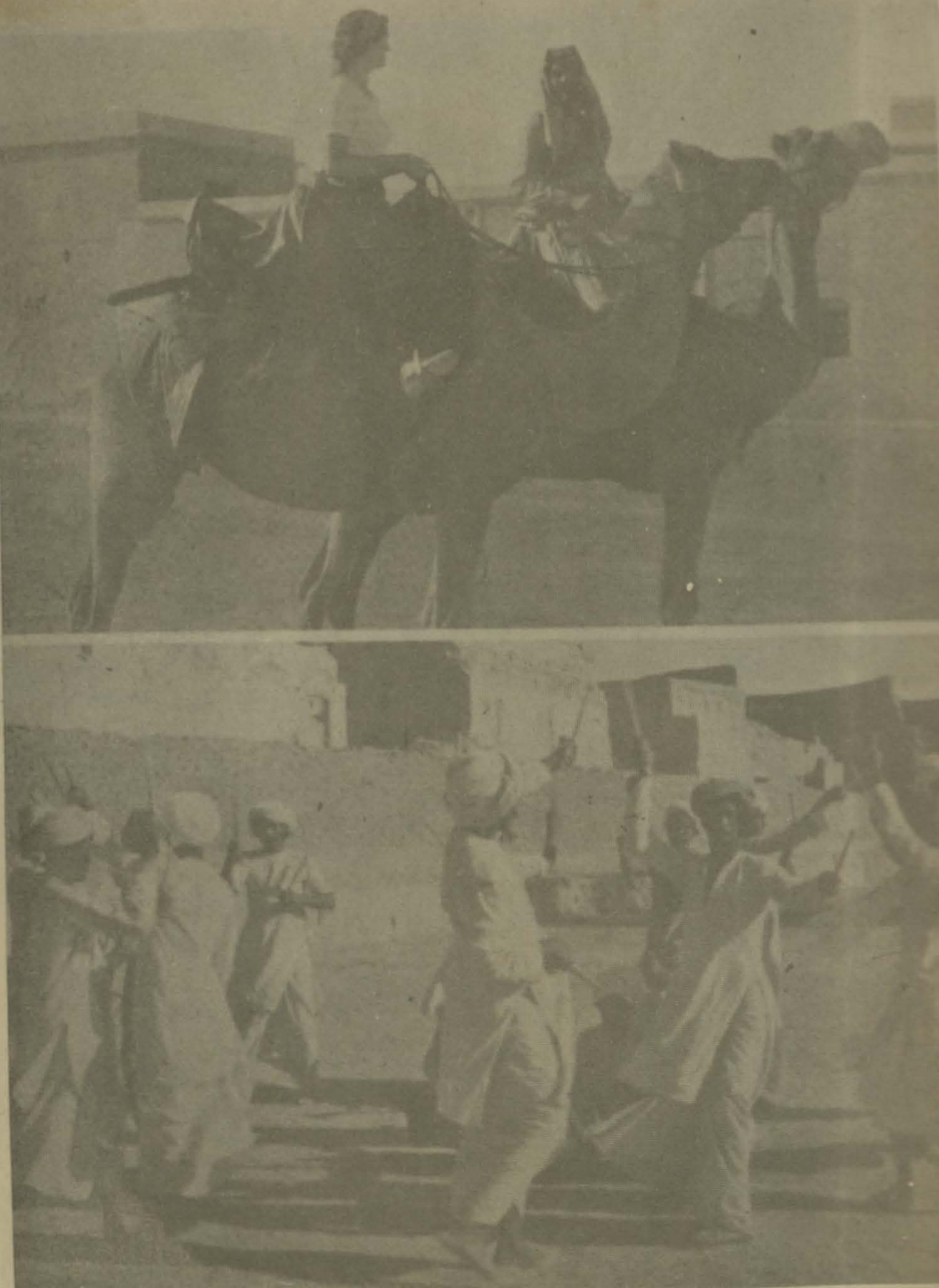
Perhaps the most spectacular of his efforts and the one that appealed to me most was the building of a dam across a tributary of the Indus. It appears that the salt water from the sea was flowing into the river, and, mixing with the fresh water, was rapidly ruining the land it irrigated. Time and again a dam had been constructed, and time and again the waters burst through. Abdullah asked permission to make a last effort, which was granted rather reluctantly and sceptically, as one can well imagine. Carefully and with infinite labour he built a dam by sinking tree trunks at intervals and then gradually filling up the spaces between them. When the dam had reached the final stage at which all previous efforts had come to grief, and only the last few feet remained to be done, he took up his position on the bank, and like the prophets of old invoked his God.

The watching crowd fell silent as he felt his way among the reeds to the river's bank, and raising up his voice, called to the waters: "You are a creation of God, O river, but I also am created by Him, and am the highest of all His creatures. Therefore I command you not to withstand me. I am the agent of God, and this is a sacred trust which I lay upon you." The last few remaining posts and rubble were thrown into place, the dam held, and the waters were divided.

Before I left the office, two women had come in, shrouded in black *burqas*. Solemnly I was presented to them in a separate room where no man would dare enter. I longed to ask them whether they were both his wives, but refrained out of what I am quite sure was a mistaken sense of delicacy, for Pakistanis, like most Eastern peoples, suffer from none of our awkward restraint or outward lack of curiosity, which is held to be an indication of good breeding, but in reality produces an impression of aloof indifference, puzzling and often hurtful to races of a warmer and more eager spontaneity, who will on the slightest provocation ask your age, whether you are married, how many children you have and so on. Anyway, I promised to go and visit them on the island next day.



A little girl . . . flowering like som azzling, exotic plant



Derawar Fort: (Above) *With an escort of a Jemadar of the Amir of Bahawalpu*
Camel Corps. (Below) *The swaying circle of dancers became wilder and more animat*

My kind friends at the Yacht Club lent me a Tomtit and provided me with Kasim. Kasim was invaluable. He was a fine-looking *tindal* wearing a brilliant red fez—I cannot remember ever seeing him without it—and he was the proud possessor of a lovely pair of pale blue and white plastic sandals, which reminded me constantly of Little Black Sambo and his purple shoes with the scarlet linings, for he treasured them above everything else, and for most of the time carried them carefully under his arm.

Seen from the sea, the tiller moving like something alive under my hand as we tacked back and forth across the channel, the islands were a tumbled collection of rickety huts with crazily-tilted roofs. At no point on the island does the ground rise more than a few feet above sea-level, so many of the houses were built on stilts or platforms. The colours of the roofs varied between bright red, duck-egg blue and slate. Baba Island had the desolate Surrealistic unreality of a picture by Dali seen through a geometric pattern of mast and stay. Boats of all sizes lay on the shore, stranded like giant whales, clumsy and pathetic when removed from their natural element, while men scraped the barnacles from their bottoms, chanting all the time an age-old song in Arabic. Behind and beyond the inhabited portion stretched the raw, bright green of mangrove swamps. A flight of duck took off from the water, flying low in a scrawling line of black, necks thrust out to rise in perfect echelon. Along the shores, women and children scrabbled in the mud for coal. Once there had been a groin near the island from a steam coal depot, and still the tides washed up the precious fragments of black, although the groin itself had long since been claimed by the sea.

There was no proper landing stage at Bhit, so we manœuvred our boat as close inshore as we dared without grounding her on a mud bank. Kasim shouted, and after a considerable time a man paddled out in an incredibly long, flat, narrow boat, rather like an elongated canoe. Into this I scrambled, and, standing precariously upright, was borne a few more yards nearer the island. The last few feet I had to take off my *chaplis* and wade. A *bunder* boat loaded with women and children was just leaving for Karachi, and they all regarded me with friendly curiosity. A young lad was pressed into service by Kasim to carry my sketching

material, and we set off up the main street in a triumphal procession, followed, it seemed, by half the children on the island, several idlers who had nothing better to do, three of Kasim's cronies and two pi-dogs.

It was heavy going through the thick sand until we reached the guest-house. Someone was despatched post-haste for the keys, Kasim disappeared in search of one of the King's sons, and I thankfully sat down in the shade to await his return. Nearby a new boat was being laid down, built on the island with teak from Rangoon and Kalikot. Further away, a line of men squatted sewing a sail, spread out like a great white sheet in front of them. A ropemaker was busy twisting fibres into a long line, one end of which was tethered to a post driven into the sand. Men were sawing planks of wood with the strange square saw used all over the East, the same as might have been used in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth.

A little girl wandered to the doorway of the guesthouse, a baby on her hip. She wore enormous silver earrings and anklets and was one of the loveliest children I have ever seen, flowering like some dazzling exotic plant from her ragged draperies. She was a light, fine nut-brown in colour, almost pure Arab, with a wide mouth and enormous grey eyes. Finally, she was shooed away, in spite of my protests, and I was conveyed to the now opened house, where the King's eldest son was awaiting me. There tea and cakes appeared as if by magic, and delicious little native sweets, moulded into the shapes of apples, pears and oranges, made by the women of the Royal household. My host solemnly sugared the tea and handed it to me duly stirred, a performance which takes anything up to five minutes, and is almost a ritual.

Later, after a long conversation about the history of the island, in which the closing of the dam was illustrated by practical drawings in my sketch-book, I was taken on a tour of the island. We visited the school, where a careworn and harassed teacher was endeavouring with doubtful success to instil discipline and the three Rs or their Urdu equivalent into about twenty or thirty small boys of varying degrees of scruffiness and untidiness. Our arrival provided a welcome diversion. Proceeding to another class where a collection of small girls were learning the Quran

by heart, I tried to talk to one of them with disastrous results, for she immediately burst into tears and hid behind a giggling classmate. The teacher proudly showed me little drawings done by the pupils, of sunsets and hills and trees, very like the kindergarten work of any other country and surprisingly progressive, as drawing is still a non-existent subject in Muslim schools throughout the country. One or two of the higher-grade schools are trying to introduce it now, but it is unbelievably difficult teaching girls of fifteen and sixteen to draw when they have never been allowed to pass through the first scribbling phases of childhood, as I had found to my cost when I took over the Department of Arts and Crafts of the University of the Punjab in Lahore. When one thinks of a primary school at home, with all the modern aids to teaching, the gay books and pictures, the constructive toys, it is incredible how these children learn anything at all. Some of them, if they are lucky, may have a tattered book; more often the teacher is the only one to possess such a thing. The classroom is small, cramped, and the desks crammed together without any attempt at order.

For centuries education in Muslim countries has been in the hands of the *mullahs*, or the priest class. They alone could read, and controlled literacy with despotic ruthlessness. (In remote places, the little village school still persists, the children sitting cross-legged in the courtyard of the mosque, or under a peepul tree, their books propped up on small crosspieces of wood in front of them in lieu of desks.) Sometimes the children learned to read and write a little and recite verses of the Quran, but as soon as they were old enough to earn a few annas to help the family exchequer, off they went, and ended up with a thumb-print for a signature and getting professional scribes in the city to compose their letters if they ever had occasion to write any. Later on, with the setting up of more or less formal schools, the curriculum still continued to be fundamentally Islamic and the arts were sadly neglected. Now the reactionary party are still digging in their heels and opposing the progressives of the new generation. At the moment, as in the forming of her Constitution, there is a pitched battle going on between the Mullah and the State. Old men still sit on university syndicates and retard the progress of the young with tooth and nail. Petty bickering and

personal advancement count more than the welfare of the education of her people. Textbooks are chopped and changed so often, and the difference between the various provinces are so marked, that either the child cannot buy the current books at all or else her sister coming along next year has to find somehow an entirely new set.

I watched the eager young faces and wondered how many of them would be able to proceed to Karachi for higher education, whether there would be room for them at the schools, and whether perhaps after all these boys were not happier mending the nets as their fathers had done before them and sailing out to sea in their own boats, able to maintain at least a modicum of independence, instead of becoming petty clerks on seventy rupees a month.

Outside the Headmaster was waiting. Would I write a few words in the visitors' book? Feeling rather like the local gentry visiting the village school, I agreed. Then followed a frantic search for the book, which was seldom called for, occasions when visitors arrived from the outside world being few and far between. A couple of Austrian lady artists came about two years ago, he said, and sketched on the island, and last year a whale was stranded on its shores and people came from the mainland to see it. They were charged one anna a time. The poor beast had been an unconscionable time a-dying, and when it finally breathed its last the stench of its putrefying carcase floated over Karachi until everyone had had an opportunity of viewing the monster. The *bunder* boat hirers had done much too brisk a trade to wish for its rapid and decent burial, smell or no smell, and sweetmeat-vendors, *pan*-wallahs and so forth had fallen upon an unexpected windfall, to say nothing of the islanders themselves, who were after all the proprietors of the exhibit.

I was shown the newly-appointed hospital, shining with fresh white paint, and built up on a platform about three feet off the ground. Although the administration was in the hands of Mohammed Hussain Bhatti, who had taken a course in dispensing and nursing in a Karachi hospital, it was run by a young newly-trained nurse, very self-conscious and shy. They plan to enlarge the staff to two Red Cross midwives, two *dhais* and two compounders. Meanwhile a doctor visits the island twice a week from Karachi. All the expense of this is borne by the Bhatti family.

After this I was conducted to the shore, where about a dozen diving suits, of, I could not help thinking, a somewhat obsolete pattern, were proudly displayed. These were used mainly in salvaging work, which along with fishing is the mainstay of the community.

I called, of course, on the female members of the family, who were in a girlish twitter of excitement over my visit. Mohammed Hussain, who took me round, brought them forward one by one to shake hands, after touching our foreheads respectfully and murmuring a shy "Assalaam Aleikum" to each other. There were so many of them that I gave up trying to decide where they all fitted in, and contented myself with admiring them all and exclaiming with equal joy over the succession of fat brown babies who were brought forward for my approval. The houses were absolutely spotless and indeed were among the cleanest I saw throughout Pakistan. I was taken to see the bedroom where two enormous double beds covered with elaborate hand-embroidered bedspreads took up most of the floor space. There was light furniture made from a wood resembling maple, and a fabulous cradle that had been brought from Cutch, and must have been at least a hundred years old, swinging from a gaily-painted stand and decked with white muslin.

They brought out all their jewellery for me to see, and I sat down on the floor and made drawings of great heavy silver anklets, weighing about a pound each and all family heirlooms. The younger members, with the heartlessness of modern youth all over the world, were inclined to scoff a little at what Grandmother had worn and were amused at my obvious delight. Then the lovely gold wedding jewellery was lifted from its plush cases; the *tika*, the forehead ornament worn only after marriage, the *jumkah*, or earrings, and the fine gold chain-work that holds the *tika* in place. The heavy necklaces were almost barbaric in design and one of the girls obligingly put it all on for me to see.

They threw open chests and wardrobes, laughing and chattering and enjoying my gasps of wonder. An endless succession of gorgeous clothes was pulled out and piled up on the bed in a glittering heap of riches. There were *qamiz*, the shirt-like garment worn over the baggy trousers, made of Chinese silk in royal purple,

brilliant emerald green and pure cyclamen, all hand worked with delicate flower sprays in silks, and heavily encrusted with real gold-thread borders, each with its matching *dopattas*, almost transparent and woven with gold thread. Last but not least, one of the young women brought out her latest achievement for my inspection. To my horror and amazement, it was a woollen jumper of a fussy and complicated pattern in an unbeautiful brown and pink.

With Hussain I then visited the mosque, which had also been built by the Bhattis and was in the process of being enlarged. The building itself was a dazzling cobalt and white, with a brilliant flower design round the arched doorway, and an uneven row of shoes and sandals discarded on its steps. In the courtyard facing the entrance crowded a row of young banana trees, the translucent green of their leaves shutting out the sunlight and creating a broad, deep cave of coolness. They were watered by a pipe at whose six or eight faucets the men washed before going inside to perform their prayers.

Outside on the shore the men were casting their nets on the shallow water. Like filmy parachutes, they descended on the surface, sank, and were hauled in a few minutes later. Sometimes a small native craft sailed out in a semicircle, paying out the net as she went. Tacking back, the full net was hauled in by a line of men waiting on the shore. The fishing was carried on in the same way all along the coast, and there was an abundance of shrimps in season, a delicious fish not unlike sole called pomfret, and *mahsair*, or Karachi salmon, which do not really resemble salmon at all, but have enormous armoured scales which have to be chipped off with a hatchet.

The peak of my adventures in Karachi came with an invitation from the Bhatti family to go out on an all-night fishing trip. The islanders sail many miles out to sea and often spend a couple of days or so before they return with their catch. I duly arrived at the harbour with a substantial packet of sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs and the inevitable sketchbook. I don't quite know what I expected to see in the way of a boat, but looking down from the quayside it seemed to me not only very small, but literally swarming with men. On closer inspection, there turned out to be eight of them, including the owner, Mohammad Karim, who had

come along specially to act as my escort. She was a wide thirty-foot sailing boat, fitted with a small auxiliary engine and carrying a couple of sails. There was a tiny cabin well aft which housed the engine, some provisions, and, tucked away in its black depths, the owner's bunk. A thin carpet had been laid on the raised hatch immediately for'ard of the engine, and on this I squatted in state while the crew disposed themselves amidships.

It was a lovely evening with a freshening breeze when we nosed our way quietly out of the harbour and headed for the open sea. There is something exhilarating about being at sea in a small boat, like flying in a two-seater plane, the green waves slipping along the hull only a couple of feet away, and the tang of salt on one's lips. Soon the swell became longer and deeper and the boat plunged into the trough of the waves with a great slap of water against her side, riding the crests at a canter. The colour drained from the sky and the evening star appeared over the masthead.

Darkness came down suddenly, a couple of lanterns were lit and the water became like deep black velvet. The engine was stopped and the men began to pay out the net. Three thousand feet of it slipped quietly over the side. This operation over, we lay-to for the night. Amidships the men rigged up a canvas windshield, and brought out a shallow, scooped-out stone, in which they proceeded to light a fire to cook the evening meal. The leaping flames lit up their faces; they were a tough-looking lot, and the firelight made them wilder than ever. Charcoal smoke drifted back, choking and pungent. Above, the masts tilted crazily against a ceiling of stars. The mate brought me a glass of thick, black, smoky tea. Little snatches of song flung back disjointedly from the men. The glow of the fire dwindled and sprang into flame again. The ship was plunging and tossing, heeling so far over that it was a feat of balancing to keep from falling over.

The sole toilet on this tiny boat consisted of a contraption rather like a small loose box, built out precariously over the stern. For the last hour or so I had been trying to summon up courage to approach it. With the gathering night and determination born of necessity, I indicated my intentions to Karim, without whose steadying arm I could never have reached my goal with

safety. The sides of this extraordinary box reached roughly up to my waist, but Karim solemnly bolted me in, and, withdrawing to a reasonable distance, modestly turned his back and contemplated the stars. Uncontrollable mirth overcame any false shame, and, thrown about inside my box, I shook with helpless laughter.

The meal over, the crew rolled themselves up in blankets, some amidships and some on the tiny bit of deck over the wheelhouse, and calmly went to sleep. Karim offered me his bunk beside the engine, but in spite of the cold I elected to remain on deck, and lay down on the hard boards, covered with my most inadequate blanket. After a few minutes the mate struggled aft bearing in one hand what even in that light appeared to be a very greasy-looking pillow. I was afraid to offend him and meekly allowed him to place it under my head. Sleep was impossible. Every time I dozed off the boat gave a terrific lurch and I shot across the deck. Later the mate rigged up an oar lashed above the gunwale to prevent me from sliding overboard. Karim had meanwhile taken refuge in his bunk. The place was reeking of oil and would have been guaranteed, I should have thought, to turn all but the strongest of stomachs. Fortunately, for me Providence has so constituted my reactions that I remain utterly impervious to swift movement of any kind, on air, land or sea, an idiosyncrasy for which I find myself constantly apologizing when hardier spirits than I are laid low.

Morning came at last. The stars faded from the sky and dawn came up in a sea of pale emerald, amethyst and the blue of watered milk. About five o'clock tea was brewed again, and this time I was glad of the hot, smoky stuff to warm me up. My legs were stiff and cramped and my back breaking with the effort of sitting upright on the swaying deck. I ate the remainder of my lunch ravenously. Karim emerged resplendent in blue-and-white pyjamas, the decks were cleared for action and the hold opened up. The mate took up his position in the bows on the port side and begun singing an old Sindhi song, the chorus of which was taken up by the five men along the starboard gunwale. They hauled in the net hand over hand, keeping time to the song, while another man just above the hatch disentangled the leaping fish and tossed them with unerring aim into the hold. I struggled forward and, with one arm firmly round the boom and legs planted wide

apart, watched the fine net piling up the flopping fish, their scales silver and iridescent in the pale morning light.

The sun came up, and still the net seemed to have no end. The chant went on, "*Eeeeee numshah. . . . Eeeeeee gumshah . . .*" sounded over and over again with a melancholy sadness as old as time itself. The men changed places and the remainder of the net was hauled in from the port side. As the last few yards came up in a shower of fine spray all was made fast, hatches battened down and the engine started up. A few fish had been kept for the crew's breakfast, and one of the men squatted on the deck preparing them, chipping off the thick outer scales with an axe, gutting the fish and tossing it over to the cook. In our wake a flurry of seagulls screamed and fought over the offal. A great basket of fruit appeared as if by magic, and Karim, now properly dressed, shyly brought me my share of the food. The sun seeped into the planking, and we headed back to port.



Chapter 5

BAHAWALPUR STATE

"WHAT, travel inter-class? You're not serious, surely? You don't know what you're saying. You'll have to sit up all night, probably have half your luggage stolen. Anyway, it's just not done. Letting down the side." The *sahibs* stretched their white-trousered legs and shouted for another beer. Murree beer, of course, but not too bad at that. Had I announced that I was about to renounce the world and turn Buddhist, it couldn't have caused more consternation.

I sat sullenly gazing out to sea, my feet planted firmly and obstinately once again on the veranda of the Yacht Club and realized that I had seriously disturbed the *sahibs* from their Saturday afternoon race. Such light-hearted defiance of a strict *tabu* might have the most far-reaching consequences. I could almost hear the Commodore muttering as he dodged the boom round Kimari, "I say, Dippy old chap, don't you think she's a bit odd, that woman, what?" and the resulting loss of the race to the Commodore's wife, tacking in masterly fashion across their bows.

The whole situation came about because at a moment's notice I had elected to stop on my way north at Bahawalpur State to see an historic desert fair of which I had just learned, and had failed hopelessly to secure a seat on the Pakistan Mail. I had promised Colonel Dring to be at Rahim-yar-Khan the following

morning, and having at last got something laid on, so to speak, nothing short of an earthquake would have changed my plans. I had travelled "inter" before, and was not greatly disturbed on this account, only this time I had no bearer to share my troubles and look after my creature comforts on the journey. My slender budget would not permit of the inclusion of Ghul Mahommad, who had reluctantly been persuaded to stay behind.

My departure that night from the Kashmir Hotel assumed the nature of a last and final leave-taking of someone who is going off to the other side of the world, and nearly succeeded in making me lose the train. I promise Ghul Mahommad to look up his family when I reach Kohat, I bestow on Salim a worn-out pair of *chaplis* which certainly seem too big for him as he scuffles about in the dust, but make him deliriously happy. With countless "*Pah mah khah da shah*" and "*Amin lah tah sarah*" from my Pathan friends, I finally roll off, having chosen the Victoria with the most robust-looking horse I can find, and make my way to the station. Alas! the farewells have taken much longer than I anticipated, and by now the platform is a seething, milling cauldron of passengers, standing shoulder to shoulder and shouting at each other. Small boys are padding along, balancing cane frames on their heads, each with its attendant cluster of flies lighting on the sticky sweetmeats in a black cloud, or dragging wooden boxes heavy with clinking bottles and shouting, "Lemon *bu . . . rif*, soda *bu . . . rif*" (iced lemonade, iced soda). Men sway by with the trays of *samosas*, and tea is dispensed in little clay cups without handles which can be thrown away after use. Beggars crawl among the throng and swarm up the wrong side of carriages. Little family groups, infinitely pathetic, are scattered over the platform, squatting patiently waiting for I know not what. Women like small white ships billow along the platform behind their lords and masters, a thin braceleted wrist holding aside a *burqa*, or clutching a small, naked child. I shudder at the sight of my typewriter balanced glacially on a suitcase swaying ominously on my coolie's head, and walk as nonchalantly as possible past the first-class carriages, past the air-conditioned coupés reserved for commissioners, company directors, railway officials and such exalted persons, whose fares are paid out of company funds, and who are therefore credited with all the delicate sensibility of a

Jane Austin heroine, and protected from contact with the common herd and the common dust. I walk on past the second class, to the undoubted astonishment of my porter, until I come to the "inter", which, alas! is full to overflowing. I peer in hopefully. There seems nothing for it but to squeeze in anywhere I can.

A nice Pakistani, leaning out of the window and seeing my plight, assures me that there is a seat in his compartment. I can see what might be described as half a seat beside the only woman in the carriage. She is wearing a black *burqa* enveloping her from head to foot like a shuttlecock, and has a child on her lap. However, my energetic friend is busy stowing away my luggage. Some of it goes under the lady in *purdah*, and I wonder whether her husband will take exception to such unseemly scrabbling around her feet.

Just as the last piece of luggage is in position and, dripping with sweat, I have paid off the coolies, the guard thrusts his head in at the door and hisses, "There is a seat in the first class for the *mem-sahib*—come this way." I look helplessly around. My luggage is scattered now over the whole compartment, and I certainly do not feel inclined after my Herculean struggles, to say nothing of the kindness of my friend, to give up my hard-won seat and pay about three times the amount. I feel, too, that it would appear distinctly ungracious. The guard makes one more effort. Doubtless he has been saving this seat for just such an occasion, with a view to receiving an extra large tip, but he has gone too far this time, and I smile wickedly and tell him that I am perfectly comfortable. It has a good effect on the other passengers, who were obviously keyed up to know just what I would say. They relax visibly, tell the guard to mind his own business, and beam on me warmly. My neighbours magically make a little more room for me and we settle down like old friends.

At last the final gong scatters the farewell parties along the train, the whistle blows and we are off. No sooner has the train begun to move than a fat little man, glasses perched on the end of his nose, and clutching a battered attaché case, jumps with great agility into the carriage, flips open the case, and begins distributing leaflets. Intrigued, I politely accept a bundle of dog-eared letters and discover that he is travelling for a patent medicine

for the teeth and gums. Idly I begin to sift through his sheaf of testimonials. Countless erstwhile sufferers have written glowing accounts of Dr. Habib's renowned Cure. The acute agonies these poor creatures had endured before their discovery of this miraculous panacea are described in all their painful details. Famous doctors had given them up as hopeless. Dentists had shaken their heads and warned them that all their teeth would fall out. Sometimes it was a mother, sister or aged relative who was the sufferer. Then the writer, waxing eloquent, would describe the agonies endured watching a loved one writhing in misery. I am thrown into silent convulsions, but not so the rest of my fellow travellers. With rapt attention, they hang on Dr. Habib's every word. Nimbly he springs from one end of the carriage to the other, skipping over outstretched legs and never ceasing what must have been a most convincing patter. First one and then another unties a knotted *lungi* and purchases a bottle of the magic liquid. No high-pressure American salesman could have done better.

He descends at the next station, doubtless to return on the down-going train and repeat the process. I wonder idly whether he does this all day and speculate on what success he could have on the London Underground.

Meanwhile, I had entered into conversation with several of my neighbours. The gentleman on my right has inquired my age, whether I am married, where I am going, and I try hopelessly to convince him that such questions are not considered polite when dealing with unknown females. In the end I give it up. Somebody gives me the welcome news that a few people are getting out at Hyderabad and soon there would be much more room. So it came to pass, and before night came along we were all able to stretch out on the seats.

As the train rattles its way through Sind I remember that it is being borne along on over a hundred miles of nicely-laid third millennium bricks, and the thought is startling and slightly disquieting. The railway was laid in 1856 by John and William Brunton, who were much exercised over obtaining ballast for the projected line, and in their search they stumbled upon the now-famous ruined cities of Brahminabad and Harappa. John found his ready-made quarry in Brahminabad, while his brother, in charge of the Multan-Lahore section of the line, robbed the dusty

mounds of Harappa, prehistoric capital of the Punjab. These practical depredations, however, led to the discovery by General Cunningham, then Director-General of an Archæological Survey of Northern India, of various antiquities unearthed by the railway workmen, the first-known remains of the civilization now named from the site of Harappa.

Morning came, and after my rest I felt refreshed and gay. I had been given instructions to get out at Rahim-yar-Khan where I would be met and thereafter taken to Baghdad-ul-Jadid by car. Over breakfast we chatted like old friends. There is none of the aloof *snobbisme* of the average English railway-carriage in Pakistan. You will be offered a share of a humble meal of *chapatti* and *pulao*, and asked to stay with the family should you ever visit their village. Addresses will be exchanged, and by the time the journey is over lifelong friends have been made who will welcome you at any time. We were all involved in discussing Lahore and our mutual friends there when the train stopped at a station. After some minutes one of the men in the carriage said politely: "Excuse me, madam, but weren't you getting out at Rahim-yar-Khan?" "Yes, of course," I nodded. A glance at the board on the platform revealed the awful truth. This was Rahim-yar-Khan.

I sprang to my feet. Everything was littered all over the compartment. They all set to, however, and gathered up my gear pell-mell, and somehow it was all spilled out on to the platform, but in the general mêlée my handbag dropped, disgorging a medley of objects from lipsticks to bits of string. I crouched on the dusty platform cursing roundly in what was no doubt a most unladylike fashion, groping in the thick dust after elusive annas and hair-grips.

Suddenly I realized that my hand was touching a highly polished shoe. My eyes travelled upwards to a khaki-enshrouded leg. I squinted still further. An immaculately-clad figure in uniform was gazing down at me inquiringly. Something told me that this was part of the deputation sent to meet me. I did my best to regain some semblance of poise. Major Fazal Mahmoud presented himself and the others with the utmost courtesy, and one would have imagined that visitors to Bahawalpur invariably chose this unconventional mode of arrival. He did explain, however, that they had searched the first-class compartments,

then the second, and that they had given up all hope when I suddenly made my spectacular descent.

As if by magic my battered luggage was hidden in the boot of a large and shining car, and I was borne off to an enchanting resthouse with an imposing guard drawn up outside who presented arms as though I were a visiting celebrity and not a very travel-stained and disreputable-looking journalist.

Pleased and not a little flattered as I had been by my reception, before the day was over I was to find this constant turning out of the guard a trifle nerve-wrecking. It seemed as though the gallant Major never stirred a step without an escort, and to my female mind it appeared that when we slipped in for lunch or a cooling *nimbu-pani* they might have let us occasionally pass unnoticed, but no, out they came at the double, buttoning tunics and adjusting headdresses. They were always popping up. There was another batch of them at the jail, where I inspected the new buildings, a rather delicate operation, as it hardly seemed decent to enthuse over their nice new quarters to a set of convicted criminals. The old tribal law of a tooth for a tooth pertains here just as much as on the Frontier, and apparently the chopping off of a nose for adultery is quite common in the State. I met a man in the fine new hospital at Baghdad-ul-Jadid, smiling rather gruesomely, who was about to undergo a plastic operation to have a new one grafted on. The provision of such expert surgical attention should no doubt put a premium on nose-cutting as a cure for unfaithfulness; indeed, it seems scarcely worth it, as the offender is liable to come out with a very much finer nose than he possessed before.

In the afternoon Major Mahmoud handed me over to the civilian side of the administration, and it appeared I had to see almost the entire irrigation system of Bahawalpur State. We drove for miles along perilous paths of sand by the side of innumerable canals. The heavy Buick ploughed its way along the narrow, sandy road, trailing a dust wake like a solid wall behind us. Here and there straw had been strewn across the surface in an endeavour to hold it together. Our driver, Allah Buksh, inspired no confidence in me whatsoever—in fact, he was panicking visibly. He rushed us skidding down a small incline, tried to change gear at the bottom, lost his head, the wheels churned

round, spouting sand, the engine revved frantically and the car settled down on her axles. We clambered out to inspect the damage, and after a few half-hearted attempts to scoop away the sand with our hands sat down to wait for reinforcements in the shape of the jeep which was following us.

On either side the desert rolled away in long, ridged dunes, tufted with camel-thorn and thin desert grass. On the opposite side of the canal, a herd of camels wandered by. The hot sun was glancing off the sand like a burning-glass, and Allah Buksh and the occupants of the jeep, having failed in an attempt to move the car by the simple expedient of applying the jeep to its rear portion, had now succeeded in embroiling it too and were dismally tearing up camel-thorn and laying a path in front of the wheels. All the way from Rahim-yar-Khan to Bahawalpur, or as the new city is called, Baghdad-ul-Jadid, on either bank of the canal, ripening fields of wheat waved like a fringe, beyond whose edges the desert began again.

Colonel Dring had arranged with great courtesy and foresight for me to occupy a suite in the lovely state guest-house in Baghdad-ul-Jadid, and that night I luxuriated in splendour. I learned next day that the guest-house had once constituted the zenana, or women's apartments, of the palace, and for me the women lingered like small, unhappy shades, cloistered for the whole of their lives under the high, coffered ceilings, waiting only for the visit of their lord and master, growing gradually plump and obese, and finally retiring to some cushioned Nirvana of their own to make room for younger and prettier replicas of their former glory.

Walking into breakfast the next morning, I was totally unprepared for an encounter with three immaculately clad figures who rose to their feet as one man at my entry. The youngest of the three courteously introduced his companions as His Excellency, the Ambassador for the Lebanon, His Excellency, the Ambassador for Iraq, and himself, representing Syria. My own poor name must have conveyed less than nothing to my distinguished fellow guests, but it was greeted with a delightful "*Enchanté, madame,*" and the presentation of a *boutonnière* further added to my confusion. But for the bearers we might have been sitting in some country house in France, for the conversation sparkled and



All evening the pilgrims streamed in from the desert





Nomadic desert tribes at Channan Pir in Bahawalpur State: (Above) *Musicians with* tubla *and harmonium.* (Below) *Women look up shyly from their cooking*

flowed like Moselle, and I left the table to set out on my trek into the desert with the heady aura of "Parfum de Syrie" lingering on my wrist, a last gesture from the gallant Syrian Ambassador.

As I walked out into the glaring furnace of sunlight with Colonel Gilani, A.D.C. to the Amir and my guide for the day, the *mali* who had been squatting patiently in the shade rushed forward, one hand clutching the skirts of his trailing *lungi*, the other a little nosegay of flowers. No matter where one goes, this ceremony is never forgotten. In spite of the fact that I am well aware of being delightfully blackmailed into handing out a few annas in return, the gesture retains a never-failing air of spontaneity, and the gardeners, ancient and rather frail and movingly trustful, are like familiar and well-loved family retainers pensioned off into a beneficent retirement.

We piled into the waiting car, Allah Buksh grinning at the wheel, and set off in the direction of the historic Derawar Fort, lying in wild and splendid isolation in the heart of the desert about twenty-six miles from Dera Nawab Sahib. Dating back to A.D. 800, the fort was originally built by a ruling chief of Jaisalmer, from whom it was captured by the ancestors of the present ruler.

A few miles out of the city, the car left the road and bumped its way along a thin, wavering track, often lost in the desert sand, ploughing up the fine dust into long, hanging smoke clouds. Not content with this, for no apparent reason the driver would suddenly swerve off to one side or the other, and, regardless of our painful and undignified efforts to remain seated in our respective corners, race us madly off in perilous zigzags between stunted bushes, into shallow gullies and up precipitous slopes.

This great stretch of desert adjoining the Indian Rajputana states of Jaisalmer and Bikaner is a fine bit of territory for smuggling, particularly of wheat, and many a swaying camel caravan has slipped quietly across its borders. The story was told me of a zealous and enthusiastic young police officer who unexpectedly caught one of these in *flagrante delicto*, so to speak, and, rushing post-haste back to his station, telephoned headquarters with full information, no doubt seeing promotion at last within his grasp. He was ordered peremptorily to stay where he was and leave the matter in higher hands. Next morning orders came for

his immediate transfer to another district, and an officer whose eyesight was not so keen was appointed in his place.

In the distance lay a vast mirage of sparkling lake, reflecting the feathery palms that leaned across its rippled surface, now a pencil line of silver, now widening and diminishing at our approach. Bahawalpur was grilling under the first burden of its summer heat, the whole landscape a shimmering, sunburnt waste, tortured into a hard, arid crust of sun-bleached earth, the only living thing a low shrub called *khar*, which when burned is converted into soda ash for making soaps and medicines. (I saw some of it in the village at Channan Pir. The produce yields over two and a half lakhs annually, and already the possibilities of its further development were under consideration.)

The heat inside the car was almost unbearable. The Colonel had long since discarded his tunic and undone his collar. Needles of dust like red-hot particles seeped into the car, ate their way into the flesh and gritted between the teeth, covering everything with a fine powdering of grey. Little rivulets of sweat cascaded down my legs and dripped off my elbows. Suddenly through the haze I saw the fort. Rising straight out of the sand dunes, it swept upwards in pinnacles of rounded towers and striding bastions, its slightly concave towers like gigantic kilns. Built of small bricks about one inch in depth, and girt below its crenellated heights with a mosaic of triangles and squares, it lay like some fantastic sand castle, already infiltrated by the tide of years, for part of it is disintegrating and crumbling back into the desert. In the habitable portion, hidden away in its monumental depths, are stationed the Jan Nisari, or the Amir's personal bodyguard of Camel Corps, who patrol the borders of Cholistan.

It is odd to come across this name in Pakistan, but Bahawalpur is a state with a history uniquely separate from the other provinces, and the word "janisarry" is a corruption of the Turkish *yeni tsheri*, or new troops. These were a royal bodyguard of infantry formed in 1330 by Orkhan, youngest son of Osman, founder of the Ottoman Empire, and composed of Christian prisoners and children of Christian parents, forcibly converted to or brought up in Islam. They remained, strangely enough, the only standing army of Turkey until their disbandment by slaughter in 1826.

We had to abandon the car at the foot of the great winding

ramp of cobbled stones leading up to the gateway. Upwards we toiled, passing now and then wilting shrubs and cacti sprouting from whitewashed petrol drums, battered and dented anachronisms, tilted drunkenly against the ancient bricks fallen like small glissades from the leaning walls above. The whole place was wrapped in the tragic grandeur of dissolution and decay that is worn by all historic castles, palaces and forts surrendered to the elements. Like ancient, empty river beds, it seems impossible to imagine a life flowing within their dried-up shells. At one side of the central courtyard, however, cupped in the summit of the fort itself, small steps and a neat wooden balustrade announced the officer's quarters, and at our somewhat breathless approach out stepped a figure looking exactly like a P. C. Wren hero. Captain Bogah of the Jan Nisari was young, handsome, debonair and immaculately groomed, and greeted our hot and dusty little party as though we were visiting royalty.

Why is it that I am incapable of arriving anywhere without being travel-stained? My shirt was sticking to my back, and in spite of the heat, I was wearing slacks as usual, the only possible garb in which to scale parapets, clamber into the upper berths of crowded compartments, and generally sit around in comfort on the ground without an undue display of leg, a Western form of immodesty unacceptable to Muslims. Although the Prophet never commanded that women should be totally enveloped in the *burqa* (that was a later and cunning innovation by the *mullahs*) it is laid down in the Quran that a woman shall be covered up to the neck, wrists and ankles, and when talking to a man her eyes should be lowered. This last injunction displays a most human understanding of the frailties to which we poor creatures are prone, for it is wisely considered that through the communion of the eyes there exists a kind of mental rape. That this supposition has a reasonable foundation I can personally bear witness to, for I often found myself, *force majeure*, gazing modestly at the ground, seeking a refuge from the over-ardent gaze of a pair of sloe-black eyes.

We were taken on a sight-seeing tour through the dungeons, cool and damp, and then out on to the ramparts commanding the surrounding country like an eagle's eyrie. Far beneath lie the ruins of an old Hindu village, ghostly and silent, the walls

throwing long, ragged shadows across the white sand, empty windows gaping like eye-sockets in the blinding light, the skeletal framework of homes and hearths, peopled now only by wandering herdsmen or prowling jackals. Beyond rise the cupolas and domes of the Jama-Masjid, a copy of the mosque at Delhi, and built with exquisite marble brought somehow with infinite labour thousands of miles. Here are buried the royal family. Later we walked reverently barefoot over the cool, smooth marble floor, while an old man uncovered each separate sarcophagus, delicately carved like ivory under a mirrored ceiling. Across the courtyard pigeons drifted, wheeled and hovered like blown petals above the domed marble shrines of the Amir's mother and his favourite wife, an Englishwoman, whom local legend has it he has never ceased to mourn.

We came back to find the camels ranged with sprawling, untidy legs in two long rows down the centre of the upper courtyard, feeding. I never really probed the secret of where they were stabled or where the Camel Corps slept and lived. They seemed simply to emerge from the ruins and melt back into them. The male and female camels were segregated, and four furious great creatures roared defiance and wrath from a stall to which they were tethered. Later I was asked if I would like to ride one of them, and two enormous truculent-looking animals were brought round by the jemadar, who was so overcome by the presence of a female within what almost amounted to the monastery walls, that he misconstrued all the Captain's orders, and rolled such agonized sheep's eyes at me that I found it practically impossible to talk to him and maintain my dignity.

To my surprise, after I was mounted they left me to my own devices. By trial and error, after I discovered that the reins act directly opposite to those of a horse, and had overcome a slight feeling of insecurity at being perched up at such a height, and by dint of much kicking and grunting--on my part, not the camel's, nothing can describe the peculiar noise with which the camel driver urges on his mount—I did achieve a rather uncollected trot. It was exciting and extraordinarily comfortable, and I longed to be able to set off then and there into the desert. Tea was being prepared, however, and we repaired to the bare little room where Captain Bogah lived.

Into the courtyard below us then filed a dozen or so men, carrying short sticks, accompanied by a couple of musicians who squatted down in the centre with drums and flutes. Without preamble, the dancers began a shuffling, circular dance which gradually worked its way into a rhythmic pattern of thin, padding brown feet, and slender wrists crossing the sticks like swords. The men wore very long, almost transparent finely-embroidered muslin shirts over their flowing *lungi*, and on their heads were poised great heavy turbans, unchanged since the first visitors to India described them as "turbands" from the Turkish word *tulben* or *tulipant*, to which we owe the word "tulip", the turban flower. We clapped loudly and the tulip heads nodded ever more fiercely, and the swaying circle became wilder and more animated, the plaintive music echoing in the hollow shell of the building, the handful of tiny figures moving like puppets in a vast and empty stage.

I was watching spellbound when I heard Captain Bogah say something to the Colonel which I thought must be some explanation of the dance. "What did he say?" I asked innocently. Colonel Gilani looked up and replied solemnly; "He says you are very robustly built." I have never decided whether this was a compliment to my powers of endurance or to the generous curves my unconventional attire may have revealed, for before I could think of a suitable rejoinder the Captain rose without ceremony, strode into his bedroom, to appear a moment later with a small carpet rolled up under his arm, and, without giving us a glance, repaired to the veranda to say his prayers. This characteristic of the devout Muslim is apt to be a trifle disconcerting until one becomes used to it. Perhaps one of the company, during an evening's entertainment, simply retires to a corner of the room and quietly prostrates himself, while everyone else goes on merrily with the conversation. I am reminded of the letter written by an elderly and conventional Muslim visiting New York for the first time: "The Secretary of the housing section met me so nicely and gave me room 800 on the 9th floor to commune with God Almighty rather conveniently."

On his return tea was brought and a little bowl with scented soap for us to wash our hands before we ate. There was loaf sugar and cream-centred biscuits from a tin of a well-known

English brand, and the men danced on, a camel grumbled in the depths below, and the sun dipped behind the battlements. We talked long into the evening of cities, books and people, for it is an intensely lonely existence for these men, and visitors from the outside world are few. Often they go out for days on patrol, there is no entertainment of any kind save their own music and dancing. There are no women in the fort, no nearby village to stroll to of an evening, only the melancholy desert sand, the ancient stillness and the weather-beaten island of Derawar Fort that is their home.



Chapter 6

THE FAIR AT CHANNAN PIR

Out in the lonely desert areas of Bahawalpur and Cholistan there still remains an undercurrent of the primitive and the barbaric. To the flat tinkle of the *ghangroos* or camel bells the nomadic desert tribes, their women and children perched high in great panniers on the backs of the camels, wander with their sheep, goats and their small cows, lean shadows of our fat and comfortable Ayrshires and Herefords, grazing them wherever there is a blade of green or water within a day's journey. The women of these tribes are not in *purdah*, and the colours of their dresses are scattered like brilliant flowers against the white sand. Their needs are simple. They camp at night in a little circle around the low fire, and cook desert bread, or *koki*, which is made by burying a thick, flat piece of dough in red-hot sand, eating it with salt, chillies, and *lhassi*, or sour milk.

The barbaric is evident in the picturesque desert fairs and pilgrimages, half pagan, half religious, such as the one I had come to see, held for seven Fridays in March and April, during the season of Lent or *Chait* (a Hindu name meaning nearly March) at Hazarat Channan Pir, in the heart of the desert, where once the Hakra River flowed.

The story of the saint of Channan Pir is curiously reminiscent of Ishmael, and as we drove out amid strings of camel caravans, herds of sheep and goats and great carts pulled by snow white oxen, my guide and friend Mir Mohammed, who was Development Officer for Cholistan, accompanying me, told me the story. The legend dates back four hundred years, and the Mujawars, or guardians of the tomb of the saint, on whose account the pilgrimage

takes place, are now in their eighth generation. The legend has been handed down from father to son, and tells of a Hindu ruler called Sindharan, who, having no male issue, was driven in desperation to consult a Muslim *pir*, or holy man, living in the district, and begged him to pray to his God that he, Sindharan, might be blessed this time with an heir, his wife being again with child. The *pir* consented, but warned the Hindu that the child would be a Muslim. Sindharan readily agreed, but when in due course his wife was delivered of a boy, true to all such legends, he conveniently forgot about the prophecy.

However, before the child was many months old he astounded and horrified his parents by reciting verses from the Quran. Alarmed by these unnatural manifestations, and ascribing them to some evil spirit which had taken possession of the child, they carried the infant far into the desert and abandoned him at the foot of a *jand* tree.

Perhaps torn between curiosity and anxiety, they returned some days later, expecting to find the child dead. Instead, they found him nestling comfortably in a sweet-smelling cradle of *chandan* wood, swinging gently from the branch of a tree. "You see, God had sent down the cradle," explained Mir Mohammed, his peaceful face smiling with happiness. Overcome with remorse, and realizing that some supernatural power had cared for their son, they determined to take him back with them, but each time they approached the cradle it was lifted up beyond their reach, and in the end they were forced to abandon their attempt to recover the child. In the years that followed the boy grew in wisdom and holiness and became famed far and near for his miraculous powers and the purity of his life. He was given the name of Channan Pir, Channan being a corruption of *chandan*, the wood from which the cradle was made; pilgrims came from all over the country to consult him, and many were the miracles he wrought. It is firmly believed in this district to-day that any wish made in the name of Allah at the grave of the *pir* will be granted. There is something incredibly moving about such naïve and unquestioning trust, and who are we, who have long since lost touch with the faith of a little child, to deny that it can move mountains. . . .

This time the roads along the canal banks presented a new

difficulty, for the water had in many places overflowed, and our big, heavy car ploughed through the mud, skidding sideways down small gradients and round corners. Familiar now with Allah Buksh's total ineptitude at the wheel, I sat on tenterhooks lest we become completely bogged down and miss the beginning of the event, but Mir Mohammed sat with Oriental phlegm, clutching the corded strap with one hand and mopping his bearded face with the other, his black *achkan* stretched to bursting-point round his sturdy frame, discoursing earnestly on the problems of his territory, which kept him constantly on the move. Somehow we finally slithered out of the morass, and, leaving the canal, sped bumpily and dustily across the few remaining miles of desert track to our destination for the night.

Tents invariably conjure up a vivid memory of my girlhood, gradually growing closer as the advancing years draw us together again, and a tent for me will always remain an object requiring more than ordinary ingenuity to erect, liable to collapse at any moment, and into which one crawls with stealth, lest the rain without which our Scottish summer is incomplete should drip down upon our straw-stuffed palliasses. So when Colonel Dring, in a hasty telephone conversation, said he hoped I wouldn't mind sleeping under canvas, my imagination aspired no higher than a typical Army bell tent, into which six of us used to crowd with the light-hearted carelessness of youth.

It was therefore impossible to suppress a gasp of astonishment as I had my first glimpse of what had merited such a gross understatement of terms—and was called a tent. To my bewildered gaze, the two massive and imposing erections might have been conjured up from a dream of the Crusades. I almost expected to see a shield blazoned with the cross hanging in the doorway or Richard Cœur de Lion himself walk across the desert sand. They rose gracefully billowing in the soft evening light, scalloped and canopied like small canvas castles, with three rooms inside, equipped with tables and chairs, dressing tables and bathrooms; and if not "with arras hung" at least wholly covered inside with a tapestried design on a brilliant yellow ground. Nearby, a herd of female camels and their young had settled for the night, and kept up a peculiar complaining noise, something between a roar and a low growl.

All evening the pilgrims streamed in from the desert in small caravans; families with women and children, *charpoys* and bedding swaying high in the air. Almost every group had brought along a goat, lamb, sheep or ox to be sacrificed in the morning, and most of them were preceded by men dancing and singing and playing musical instruments—pipes, bagpipes, *tublas* and horns. It is part of the ritual that a man will promise, should his wish be granted, to return the following year, sometimes dressed as a woman or singing and dancing, and the vow is carried out to the letter.

I ate my evening meal with one of these families, the camels kneeling round the outer edge of the fire, heads turned towards the centre, the flames lingering for a brief moment on their elegant heads and soft, hanging jowls, glinting on the silver ornaments of the women, or etching out the fine bone-structure of a bearded nomad. Our conversation, although limited, for they have a dialect of their own, was cordial, and as soon as I was able to convey that I had borne six children I became *persona grata* with all. The snapshots I carried around with me of the four remaining of my brood grew even more crumpled and dog-eared as they were passed from hand to hand, peered at close to the bright flames, and exclaimed over with wonder and delight, the men grinning with admiration . . . "*Wah! Wah!*" Three sons!

I was handed a shallow aluminium bowl filled with *pulao*, which I ate with thick *chapatti* which served the purpose of knife, fork and napkin. A little space was cleared and a group of musicians, shyly at first, but gathering courage and momentum, plunged into rhythmic melodies. Without any prearranged signal two or three men sprang to their feet and began to dance, clapping their hands, keeping perfect time, and bending inwards and outwards in a small circle. From the shadows others leapt into the movement. It speeded up. The spectators joined in, beating time and swaying backwards and forwards. Round and round they went, dancing with a fluid grace that contrasted oddly with the fierce concentration of their hard, bearded faces. The music floated out across the desert, thrown up into the vast concourse of stars, wild and shrill, tossed like an echo from one group to another, until it died away in small trickles of sound.

One by one the lanterns were lit and the fires sank to a red

glow. Soon a great column of smoke rose from below the shrine like a pillar of cloud, gunmetal against the whiteness of the tiny mosque. Here and there in the moonlight the trellised bones of animals picked clean by vultures enhanced the air of desolation, and under the great arc of sand life seemed sealed off from the rest of the world, the whole floor of the desert a crematorium, the spiralled dust winnowing the crevices, always a little left from yesterday's wind, so that the tiny particles mingled like chromosomes and held in their floating, almost invisible world all the imprisoned, crumbled life-cycles of generations. A few hundred yards away the putty-coloured walls of a lonely village suddenly merged with the night, pierced with tiny winking eyes of light. There was an extraordinary air of tension, of expectation, working up to the next day's celebrations, something alive and breathing in the quickened pulse of the night.

Stumbling back through the darkness, I found pails of steaming hot water awaiting me, the lanterns throwing fantastic dancing shadows of light and shade on the walls of my tent, while outside the voices of the bearers thudded against the canvas. There was no key to turn or bolt to slip, a difficult thing for one who is pursued by an obsession about sleeping behind locked doors. But in the East doors are made to be open, to be flung wide—except those of the zenana—at any time. A door shut and bolted against one's friends is a source of hurt and bewilderment where people sleep mostly in the open, and privacy in life, in death and birth, an incomprehensible idiosyncrasy of the West.

After I had bathed, my bearer came timidly in to ask whether the *mem-sahib* would go and see a sick child in the village. Although I carried around nothing but the most ordinary of medicines, the majority of the humble folk here have such a touching faith in the power of the *sahib's* doctoring that I could not refuse, however weary I might be and inadequate my skill, so, accompanied by Mir Mohammed and Ghulam Abbas, I stumbled forth into the night. We made a wide detour to avoid the great camel herd, but I could hear their breathing and coughing around me although I could see nothing, and hoped we were far enough away from them, for a female camel with her young one would be a horribly dangerous thing to walk into in the darkness.

Ghulam Abbas led the way as we climbed up the rough-hewn steps to the house (for the animals were stabled underneath). We stood in a small courtyard in one corner of which women were still cooking over a low charcoal fire, children clinging to their skirts in spite of the lateness of the hour. The father of the sick child came out full of anxious apologies and thanks and led me into a low, dark room where a woman was bending over a *charpoy* on which lay a baby of about eleven months, thin and emaciated, the skin stretched over a small body dry and burning with fever. I bent to take its temperature, and the woman seized my wrist, her eyes dilated with fear at the sight of the thermometer. She had never seen one before, and only after a patient explanation demonstrated in dumb show and the reassurances of her husband did she allow me near the child. All the time she stood rigid with fright in a corner of the tiny room. Again I was racked with despair at my pitiful lack of knowledge, and the man's simple faith. I prescribed as best I could, and told them that I would try to arrange for a doctor to come out when I returned next day. Mir Mohammed, who had stood outside quietly waiting, assured me that it would be possible and that he would see to it himself, and I sent up a small and anguished prayer that the faint flicker of life would somehow hold out till morning. With Mir Mohammed's help, I explained to the father what he could do to sustain it, and that I hoped the doctor *sahib* would give them some medicine to heal his son. "*Insh'allah*", the *mem-sahib's* doctoring would surely help. "Yes; only if it is the will of God," I answered.

Mir Mohammed came for me at four o'clock and I scrambled hastily out of bed, wide awake and with a strange, choking excitement inside me. The scene in the pale dawn, the fires still night-bright, the camels silhouetted against the amber, violet and blue of near sunrise in the desert, the men wrapped in the *chaddur* against the cool, crisp morning air; the animals being led to the slaughter, was like some fantastic Biblical vision, thrown like a mirage across the ancient desert sand. Slipping and stumbling, we followed the long procession of bleating lambs, goats and cattle, making their way at the end of a rope to the summit of a high dune running like a backbone above the shrine, with a flat stone serving as the sacrificial altar. There was little ceremony

about the actual slaughter. Two or three men held down the animal and another slit its throat in the traditional Islamic fashion, for without the ritual of *halal* the eating of its flesh is forbidden to strict Muslims. In spite of the ruthlessness of so much cold-blooded and premeditated killing, the scene held an almost hypnotic fascination, for as long as man has existed on earth this has been his means of propitiating his gods. From the days of the Incas through the whole of the Old Testament up to the innocent yet symbolic offerings of wheat and fruits practised at harvest festivals in the English Church in the present century, the spirit of sacrifice has been omnipresent.

Before me in that strange dawn, life and death were divided only by a thin flash of steel and the warm, living, breathing creature transformed into a heap of skin, flesh and bone.

After the animal has bled, it is skinned and the carcase hung up on stakes driven into the ground, carved up and a choice piece preserved for the *mujawar*, or hereditary keeper of the shrine, as a votive gift. On one side sat a man pulling out gut, from which ropes will be made, while vultures flapped endlessly and heavily on the fringe of the crowd. Always above and below was the monotonous throb of the drums and the sound of music and singing. Before sunrise the killing was over and the feasting and rejoicing began.

During all this time people had been coming and going, making their *minauti* or wishes by tying a piece of rag to the tree beneath the tomb, and at the same time giving a small donation for charity, called *mokh*, to the *mujawar*. The tree is festooned with a profusion of these strips of cloth, or *chila*, which will flutter there, perhaps for years, as a material proof of the wishes of women who will pray for a son, of a young man who will hope for a bride, or of the old who beg for the restoration to health of a loved one. Others wind their way, one by one, barefooted round the shrine, place a small stone on the mound, and kneel while the *mujawar* intercedes for them to Allah, again in consideration of a small fee. A ritual offering is then given to him of *koki* and perhaps a few choice pieces of cow's liver. I was continually being pressed to receive these titbits, with which I was soon unable to cope, and having dutifully identified myself with the ceremony by completing the performance and tearing a

shred of material from a perfectly good scarf to tie on the tree, had quite unjustifiably earned the approval of all. They prophesied all kinds of good fortune for me, from a rich husband to a family of seven sons, in spite of the fact that I assured them I was already in possession of three sons and a daughter.

The women displayed that spontaneous affection I have noticed so often in Muslim countries, and stood holding my hand or with their arms round my waist, watching the dancing. Perhaps it is because they are so starved of affection, or any outward display of it from their husbands, who too often regard them as mere chattels, mothers for their children, make much of them for the first year or two, and then tiring of them, as a child will a toy, proceed in search of new excitement. I remember when I was nursing in the Kohat Zenana Hospital, a soft-eyed, lovely Pathan girl coming in for treatment. She was very ill with tuberculosis, and I went to her house one day to try to persuade her husband to let her go without her *burqa*, in order that she might breathe some fresh air. He was willing enough, but her father, whose wishes had to be respected, could not be weaned from the old *tabu*. My Pushtu was scanty and her husband translated her remarks for me. One day she caught my hand and murmured a few words. "She says," he repeated slowly, "the moment she saw you, you stole her heart away." My emotions strangled by a Scottish reticence, I experienced an acute embarrassment and a dreadful feeling of my own unworthiness of such transparent affection and love, which is part of the female social order of things if one is born a Muslim.

About nine o'clock, the camps were broken up, the animals taken to a nearby water-hole by the women, who returned bearing great *chattis* of water on their heads, walking with the easy grace of the Powindahs, their flowing skirts and fluttering *dopattas* patterning the grey sand with sudden, staccato notes of colour. Almost imperceptibly the little bands melted away into the desert not to return for another year, and the shrine was left stark and alone in the burning sun, with only the old man kneeling by the side of the tomb.

I have promised to go back one day when I have got my wish, but as the night train bore me roaring and rattling on its way northwards through Multan and the Punjab to Lahore, I

wondered perhaps if I had had sufficient faith. Perhaps I did not wish for the right things, and my little scarlet banner will flutter there for ever, until the winds have torn it into shreds; or until the civilisation that is creeping relentlessly over the desert will at last catch up and sweep away the simple superstitions, the nomadic tribes, and the legend of Channan Pir.



Chapter 7

LAHORE

ONE of my greatest friends and staunchest allies in Lahore was Malik Yusaf of the Public Relations Department. He lived with his large family of round-eyed, quiet little boys and plump, smiling daughters somewhere at the back of the offices which were part of Nedous Hotel, once fashionable and gay, now a dismal hostel reserved for Government officials. No matter what time of day or night I called, if he was not sitting in his little office surrounded by writers, journalists and artists, he would come hurrying through the back door, a little breathless, perhaps, having torn himself away from his siesta or a hastily-snatched meal, but as warmly welcoming as ever. He exuded a simple sincerity and a kindliness that were only matched by Jamil's in Karachi. We would settle down, another chair dragged into the circle, a fresh pot of tea and sticky cakes on a tin tray would rattle in, borne by the shaky hands of an ancient *chaprassi*.

The ticker-tape machine stuttered endlessly in the corner, the fan whirred noisily above us, visitors came and went, the telephone rang, but no one suggested leaving the poor man in peace—indeed, I believe he would have been genuinely hurt had we even thought of such a thing. Did I mention the Cotton Board, the Office for the Recovery of Abducted Women, the Thal Development, his hand would reach for the telephone, he would dial a number without looking it up, and settle back in his chair to a genial ten minutes or so of friendly banter, and somehow prevail on the person I wanted most to see either to come to his office then and there, or to allow me to go and see him.

I revisited, too, the University and my old friends there. My



Thin chapatti, *made of flour and water and eaten with every meal, are turned out at*



Village girl drawing water from a well in the Punjab

former pupils were some of them qualified, some teaching and one or two hoping for a scholarship for further study abroad. There was actually talk of holding co-educational classes for drawing in the evenings, and it was whispered that behind the scenes they had at last persuaded a female model to pose partially undressed. The want of this essential to anatomical study has been a curious obstacle, but one which is so deeply rooted in the Muslim mind as to be almost insuperable. I remember when I was there one of the girls telling me that she and her sister conceived the brilliant plan of sending for a local prostitute to pose for them. They sent off the bearer with a note to say that they would pay her fifty rupees if she would come; a haughty reply came speedily back: "You can come to my house and do anything you like with me for five rupees, but I will not pose in the nude for you for one hundred!"

There were never-to-be-forgotten rides in the early morning with an English boy who carried on a wool business in the city. His warehouse was a colourful and fascinating place where Pathan women sorted out the various colours, and men with brown, almost naked bodies washed the wool in huge tanks, from whence it was taken to be dried, graded and baled for export. G. told me a macabre tale of one of the hands who disappeared one day, to reappear neatly baled with the best carpet wool on arrival in New York. So careless and fatalistically callous is the general attitude to life and death that no one seemed to have missed him until pay-day, when a cursory search was made.

On riding mornings I had to rise at four o'clock in order to be at the stables by five. The Colonel of the 13th Lancers kindly put their horses at our disposal, and great raw-boned unpredictable things they were, but they carried us nobly out over the rough ground bordering the outskirts of the cantonment. We were liable suddenly to meet the army on manœuvres, and one day we nearly flew over the heads of our startled mounts as without warning half a dozen blackened, netting-helmeted faces materialized out of the scrub in front of our noses; but we were never actually separated from each other, and somehow came back in one piece. Back to the Club where we drank great jugs of fresh lime-juice, or wakened up the bearers for coffee with thick cream.

On other mornings there was golf on the dry, hard little

course, where a ball will run flatteringly for incredible distances, and we were revived at the ninth hole by iced water borne by smart Pathan bearers. There was always the unexpected joy of the sound of the pipes in the distance as the band of the Border Police marched its men to morning P.T., the regimental goat trotting nonchalantly in front of them, with an occasional prod from the Pipe Major's ceremonial stick. Beside the short fifth the shining, sleek police horses would be brought in to be watered, fed and rubbed down after their morning exercise. Partridges would scurry into the undergrowth with their comical, stooping run; sometimes a kite would swoop down upon the ball, and an occasional snake would bring the *aghe wallahs* (the little ragged boys who run on in front and find the balls or at least profess to look for them) shrieking with sticks or one of my favourite irons.

But there are other things in Lahore, and if Karachi is the newest city in Pakistan, then Lahore must surely be the oldest. It is the capital of the Punjab, and there is a distinct feeling in certain circles that it should have been the capital of Pakistan. Had it not been for its unpleasantly close proximity to the border, it might have been chosen instead of Karachi, for its ancient city has been wrought of the dust of countless religions, dynasties and races. In the early morning a faint grey mist lies gently over the Ravi. The great, ugly water buffaloes come down to drink and wallow in its muddy waters from their homes in tiny compounds within the walled city. A small bright cupola glitters like raw gold beneath the old red bricks of the Fort, and within the crumbling walls of the city the spikes and minarets of mosques and tombs thrust upwards like spears through the crazy jumble of high, narrow houses.

Strange men live there, dressed as women, who appear at the birth of a son to dance and make music; Kabuli moneylenders and Pathan tobacco merchants trafficking in opium and *charras*; and local *goondas*, the Glasgow razor-slashers of Pakistan, who will for a consideration undertake any crime in the calendar. In the depths of the city is the inevitable red light district, where girls sit at open doors or windows and bargain with prospective clients. This profession and its exponents, which, like the poor, we have always with us, is a continual thorn in the flesh of the

city fathers, who suggested in all solemnity at a meeting reported in the local paper not long ago that the district ought to be moved lock, stock and barrel to the banks of the Ravi, where the annual floods would eventually provide a just and natural annihilation. In some of the lanes it is only possible to squeeze past a buffalo by flattening oneself against the wall, but if one disregards the dust, the dirt and the smells Lahore holds for those who seek the fascination of the ages.

Huen Tsang, the Chinese Marco Polo, who visited the Punjab in A.D. 630, speaks of a large city containing many thousands of families, chiefly Brahmin, lying on the frontier of the Kingdom of Cheka, which extended from the Beas to the Indus; and in A.D. 982 the Hamdud-ul-Alam described it as containing numerous quarters, bazaars, markets and temples full of idols, with a profusion of pine trees, almond trees and coconuts. Lahore is still full of greenery, from the upper Mall to the really lovely Lawrence Gardens, now officially the Bagh-i-Jinnah, the scarlet flowers from the Chinese tallow tree or the great feathery yellow laburnum fronds spread like a carpet in the cool shade. Enormous flying foxes hang like pieces of tattered black silk from the branches, and in the night from the nearby Zoo comes the roar of the lions.

The great Mahmoud of Ghazni conquered the city in A.D. 1021 and struck there his first gold coin, bearing Mahmudpur as its mint name, with Sanskrit characters on one side and Arabic on the other, and the Pakistan Mint still has its centre in Lahore. After the Ghaznavides came the Moghals and Lahore's greatest glory:

> Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can
> And Samarchand by Oxus, Temir's throne,
> To Paquin of Sinaean kings and thence
> To Agra and Lahor of great mogul.

Their imprint still remains in the now somewhat shoddy and ill-kept Shalimar Gardens and Jehangir's tomb, where Lahore picnics and scatters orange-peel and dirty paper, and the imposing Lahore Fort, a mere shell of its former loveliness. All the various types of architecture and decoration used by the Moghals can be found in Lahore, from the distinctly Hindu influences of the time

of Humayun, the second of the Moghals, to the court style of Shahjehan, and the innovation of glistening white marble instead of the red Mithura stone and mosaic tile work of Persian origin.

Not much has survived of the buildings prior to the Moghals, but wandering down an obscure and miserable side alley south of the Lahore Gate I came across the most piquant perhaps of the ancient tombs, the sarcophagus of one Qutb-ud-Din Aibak, the conqueror of Delhi, who was killed while playing polo in A.D. 1210. Polo originated in the little states of Hunza and Gilgit up on the North-West Frontier of Pakistan, where every village has its ground, painstakingly levelled out amid the steep hillsides, and history reveals that Nur Jehan and her ladies played polo at night with illuminated balls.

The most romantic ghost that haunts us from the past is imprisoned in the tomb of Anarkali, or "Pomegranate Blossom", the lovely dancing girl who was brought up, or so legend has it, in Akbar's harem, and was suspected of carrying on a clandestine love affair with Prince Salim, heir to the throne. The king, true to the best traditions of royal romances, disapproved, and on his orders she was either walled up alive or barbarously executed in A.D. 1599. Prince Salim, on attaining the throne, built a large tomb over her grave, and the stone bears well-cut inscriptions, including the death of Anarkali with the words "In Lahore". Around the stone are engraved the ninety-nine attributes of God, and a poignant couplet by Salim, now Jehangir:

> Ah, could I behold the face of my beloved once more,
> I would give thanks unto my God until the day of resurrection

and the words, "The profoundly enamoured Salim, son of Akbar". Her memory is still perpetuated in the bazaar bearing her name, where one can wander for hours at a time and buy anything from bangles to Primus stoves.

From the canal colonies of the Punjab, running out like veins on a leaf from the vicinity of Lahore, comes the bulk of one of Pakistan's two major cash crops, cotton, second only in importance from the point of view of earning foreign exchange to East Pakistan's jute trade, and the wheat that has given to the Punjab

its name of "the granary of Pakistan". All round Okara and Montgomery the air is strung with the *ploop, ploop* of the cotton-ginning machines, and the roads with long lines of slow-moving bullock carts bulging over with the silver fibre. Acres of fruit gardens growing limes, oranges and grapefruit line the canals, and the new aluminium tobacco-drying sheds sparkle in the sunlight. The golden grain spirals upwards, spraying out in brilliant particles against the skyline, the family bullock or buffalo trampling out the wheat on the village threshing floor or turning the vast millstones to grind it into *atta*. Like the Persian wheel under the pipal tree, the same methods have persisted and lingered on for centuries, an age-old pattern of living, through the sowing and the reaping, a cycle of fertility that has revolved in the same manner as long as anyone can remember.

The Punjabis are athletic and graceful; the men have always provided one of the main units of the defence forces, and are fine natural horsemen. The famous stud farms of Montgomery and Sarghoda have supplied both horses and mules for the Army and the surrounding districts, as well as the finest race-horses in India —actually, one of these from the Renala Stud has been exported and raced in Britain. For hundreds of years, *dangal*, or wrestling, has been the sport of the youth of what is now known as Pakistan and the cradle of its origin, the Punjab. *Dangal* is largely an inherited art, its secrets passed on from father to son. The wrestlers command tremendous honour and respect and ranked at one time among their patrons some of the richest and most influential of the Indian maharajahs. Trials of strength and skill have always delighted and impressed Islamic peoples, and *dangal* in Pakistan has never deteriorated into the brutality which has come to be associated with "all-in" wrestling in the West. It bears indeed a certain family resemblance to the Cumberland style, seen so often against the sombre background of fell and dale.

While we were in Karachi, I was lucky enough to attend as a member of the Press—and, I may add, the only woman in about five thousand spectators—an exhibition of wrestling in the Y.M.C.A. grounds, and afterwards to receive a personal invitation to visit the wrestlers at the Akhara Bholu Pahalwan, Bholu's School of Wrestling. The Prime Minister, Kwaja Nazimuddin, Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar, Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan and the

Khan of Kalat were among the spectators, while Major-General Akbar Khan acted as referee.

The loudspeakers blared forth across the arena, flanked with excited crowds, turbans and *lungis* brilliant with colour, sprinkled like confetti amidst the starched white of shirt and *shalwar*. "Bholu Pahalwan, *Rustem-i-Pakistan*! Hamida Pahalwan, *Rustem-i-Hindustan*! Achha Pahalwan, *Rustem-i-Punjab*!" (Bholu the wrestler, Champion of Pakistan, Hamida, Champion of Hindustan, and Achha, Champion of the Punjab.) A wild surge of cheering greeted the champions as they advanced towards the ring, the sunlight seeming to magnify their great girth. Bholu leapt into the air, shouting "*Allah Akbar!*" (God is great). Aslam, *alias* Achha Pahalwan, draws a specially admiring burst of applause, for he is tall, handsome and well-built, and so far has not seen fit to put on mere weight of flesh. The band of the 8th Punjabis marches and countermarches to the skirl of the pipes, and above the noise of cheering floats nostalgically the Scottish air, "Over the Sea to Skye".

I was shivering with excitement, not quite knowing what I had let myself in for, and quite alone. The only other occupant of the little ringed-off space in which I sat in state was a middle-aged, imposingly upright figure, resplendent in purple turban, gold-embroidered *lungi* and fine muslin shirt. He had long, fierce black moustaches, but the piercing black eyes heavily ringed with *surama* were kind, and even to my unprofessional eye he looked as though he might know something about the game.

Diffidently I sidled forward and essayed a shy "*Assalaam Aleikum?*" Slightly startled, he turned round and nodded, pleasantly, "*Waleikum, salaam!*" although he could not fail to have been a trifle disconcerted by the appearance of a European woman at a wrestling exhibition. I asked him the names of the contestants, and from that we drew up our chairs and I realized that somehow I was in on the ground floor, so to speak, for he knew all there was to know about Punjabi wrestling. It was only later in the afternoon that General Akbar Khan told me I had been talking to the great Gama Pahalwan, '*Rustem-i-Zaman*, at seventy-five undefeated Champion of the World. This fine old man is a legendary figure in the sporting world, and every Pakistani schoolboy knows his name. Wrestling is in his blood. Gama's father and grandfather

were wrestlers before him, and he has known no other life, nor would he wish to, for his heart is bound up in the game, and even to-day his strength is phenomenal.

He told me that the finish of a bout is declared when one or other of the opponents is brought down with his shoulder-blades resting squarely on the ground. The actual platform where the wrestling takes place is a square of concrete about twenty-five feet in width and filled in with soft sand, the whole being raised about four feet or so off the ground and reached by four steps on either side. After each bout, groundsmen leap up and thoroughly rake and break up the surface. There are no ropes round the ring, and time and again a sudden move results in two bodies locked in an embrace toppling headlong over the edge. If the referee is quick enough, he can very often succeed in stopping the fight just before this point is reached and ordering the wrestlers back to the centre, where he places them meticulously in the precise position in which he found them. Usually *dangal* begins with bouts between comparatively unknown men who hope one day to make their names. Sometimes so anxious are they to get to grips with each other that they begin the bout before they reach the ring, and friends have to rush out and separate them. Invariably there will be a couple of young boys, thin, skinny little creatures with cropped heads and minute satin triangular pants, made all the more tiny in comparison with the enormous figures of the professionals. Throwing a few handfuls of sand at each other in the approved style in order to give each other a grip, they grapple like veterans, to the delight of the crowd.

Dressing-rooms there are none. The wrestlers change in the open air on the edge of the arena. Although women are rarely, if ever, present, the rules of modesty are strictly observed. Each group of wrestlers squats in its own little circle surrounded by intimates and supporters, often complete with an attendant band of musicians who have accompanied their triumphal progress through the streets from their gymnasium. One of the most amusing names among the competitors, which threw me into fits of uncontrollable mirth, belonged to one Babu, nicknamed Pari Pekar, or Fairy Body. Needless to say, anything less like a fairy could scarcely be imagined.

After the exhibition, I promised Gama to go and visit him

at the wrestling school next day. Practice is held in the courtyard of a house in the Pakistan Chowk, where the wrestlers live and train in an atmosphere of almost monastic seclusion, in which my invasion was an unprecedented event. Discipline is rigorously enforced, and even wives have to be content with a brief visit perhaps once in two years, when their husbands are permitted to make the long journey north to their homes in the Punjab. They rise at five o'clock, and after washing, followed by morning prayers, an unfailing ritual, they begin their exercise, then bathe, massage and breakfast. They eat a tremendous amount of food, consuming between them about ten pounds of meat a day, and each accounting for more than five *sers* of milk. They posed for me in every conceivable attitude, but were more eager to have a "nice picture" than a realistic one of actual combat, and I was forced to use my puny strength to push and shove them into sufficiently active holds for a convincing shot.

Gama sat enthroned in a corner like a venerable patriarch, beaming on us all and on myself in particular. He insisted on my drinking great tumblerfuls of *thandiai*, a thick, sweet, milky liquor, prepared from pure crushed almonds and sugar, a beverage to which they attribute much of their strength, and tasting to the novice uncommonly like hand-lotion.

At every gymkhana in the Punjab and even further north there are wrestling bouts, but so far few have arisen who can challenge the supremacy of Bholu or his younger brother, Aslam. Hamida has since died while on a tour of India, but Gama still sits and offers advice and remembers the days when he was *Rustem-i-Zaman*.



Chapter 8

THE GRAND TRUNK ROAD

FROM Lahore I begged a lift north to Nowshera, where I had undertaken to run a little dispensary at an agricultural seed farm on the banks of the Kabul River. David was going up on business, and although he grumbled a little at having a lone female on his hands, having known my father, he felt that the least he could do was to deliver me safely at my destination. It had been raining all day when we set out, raining as only monsoon rain can fall, and the whole landscape was washed clean and bright. All the colour had flowed back into the parched earth, into the flat farmlands of Gujranwala and Gujrat. The sky was a mass of great cumulus clouds shading from purple to blue and white, and gathered in a wanton abandon of shape and form, strewn across the heavens like Paul Nash's cloud flowers; the country broken up by mirrors of shining pools and *jheels*, where the teal, mallard and pink-feet come flighting in at dusk, down from the slate-blue ridge of the Salt Range, running like a backbone across the province.

Through Lahore runs the Grand Trunk Road, the *Serak-i-Azam*, historic highway of the Moghals that runs swift as an arrow from Delhi to Peshawar, perhaps the most famous highway in the world, at least next in eminence to the trans-Asiatic silk routes. Along its whole length stand at intervals of about twelve miles the old *serai* where travellers could camp during the night; while at about two miles' distance from each other rise small stone obelisks, the *kos minars* built in 1619 by the Emperor Jehangir. The *kos* was an ancient Indian measure of distance, which varied from time to time and was derived, it is believed, from *krosa*, meaning a cry. It was in all probability a synonym for

the *goruta* (the moo of a cow), and used to indicate distance as early as 300 B.C.

From Delhi, Akbar, with his warlike and glittering retinue, rode up the Grand Trunk Road on his expedition against the Governor of Kabul; Nur Jehan and her ladies must have often travelled leisurely along its tree-lined route, stopping at some resthouse of cool gardens and green shades on her way to Wah. The highway has seen battles, conquests and bitter retreats, and has been ripped open and torn to pieces by floods. In 1947 came the refugees. No one who has ever seen a mass migration of homeless, bewildered, hungry people can ever forget it. The weak are left behind, animals and humans, to die at the side of the road, while the strong press on in an hysterical, frightened horde, driven by desperation and blind, unreasoning panic. The trees that once shaded princes were cut down for firewood to warm them on those cold, wintry nights. Graves were so hastily dug that between the waving grasses and the *kikar* trees protruded arms and legs, withered branches like stunted trees, while above was a constant spiral of vultures.

We left in the cool, fresh early morning, passing the pile of Lahore Fort on our right, its bizarre conglomeration of styles and influence arresting and fascinating. I thought of the words used by Jehangir in his memoirs, describing the new central courtyard built at his orders:

> From head to foot how sweet, turn where I please.
> Soft glances at my heart cry, "Take thy ease".

> On Monday the 9th of the Divine month of Azar, corresponding with the 5th Muharram [the day of mourning for the prophet's son-in-laws, Hossein and Hussain] A.H. 1030 [November 20, A.D. 1620], mounting an elephant of the name of Indra, I went towards the city, scattering coins as I proceeded. After three watches and two *ghoris* of the day had passed, at the selected auspicious hour, having entered the royal residence, I alighted happily and auspiciously at the building recently brought to completion and finished handsomely by the exertions of Ma'mur Khan. Without exaggeration, charming residences and soul-stirring sitting-places had been erected in great beauty and delicacy, adorned and embellished with paintings by rare artists. Pleasant green gardens with all kinds of flowers and sweet-smelling herbs deceived the sight.

Further on, almost hidden in the trees on a tiny spit of land running out into the Ravi, lies the Queen's summer palace, the feathery palms still and motionless as paper cut-outs, crumbling on its tiny promontory, but invested still with the magic of other days. We took the Sheikapura road and stopped, as I had often wanted to do, to explore the Palace of the Hindu Rajah, towering up on a piece of rising ground just outside the town. We were about to step in through the tiny postern let into the massive gates when a marble tablet caught my eye. Its strange inscription read that a Rehabilitation Centre had been opened in the building by the Punjab Minister for Industry a year or so before. Puzzled at such evidence of the advance of progress within these ancient, time-weathered walls, we wandered up the old elephant ramp in search of some hive of activity. The place was deserted. A startled flutter of doves tumbled out from the gaping upper-story windows, circled over the nearby village in a flash of amethyst wings, and, wheeling, returned to their nesting-place. In the central courtyard a well was sunk, a long, deep cylinder of green fringed with ferns, in which two tortoises swam contentedly. In one corner narrow stairways climbed up in all directions, ending in tiny, vaulted rooms with a miniature stone dais supported by elegant fluted pillars commanding a view of the surrounding country.

A young man sidled up, curious that we should find anything interesting. Was this destroyed at Partition, we asked. "*Zuroor*", he grinned cheerfully, "certainly"; and idly chipped off the corner of a tile as he spoke. Every wall was rich with murals in tempera, of elephants and warriors on stylized, gaily-caparisoned horses, of birds and beasts and maidens, and the general design seemed more Rajput than Hindu. But everywhere names were scribbled, and the rich Multan tiles fast disappearing as the winds and the rains thrust through the skeleton building like lattice work.

Finally, we stumbled into the main hall, the floor covered with bird droppings, the exquisite carved wooden doors its only remaining glory. Here, almost indistinguishable in the semi-darkness, squatted two old men, weaving on primitive looms let into the earthen floor. We spoke to them, but one was deaf and the other only understood Punjabi. How long they had been there seemed impossible to calculate. They might have been a couple of

ghosts imprisoned within the palace, doomed for ever to weave an endless pattern. I peeped in again on the way out, just to make sure that they were still there, so unreal did it all seem.

Before rejoining the Grand Trunk Road at Gujranwala, we decided to turn off at Churkhana and run up the side of the canal. These canal roads of the Punjab were a never-ending source of delight, veining the dusty landscape in cool, silver lines, the roar of the water sluicing through the headworks sending up a cool, fresh mist of spray, and the perilous journey across some of the bigger ones, legs dangling from a wooden platform, measuring two feet by four feet, manhandled by a couple of Punjabis, easily equals the thrills of a scenic railway. We stopped at one of the white canal rest-houses set in a garden laid out with stocks and poppies, sweet peas and marguerites. In the grounds the smooth, frosted silver of blue gums shone beside the great delicate fern fronds of jacaranda; bougainvillaea swarmed in cyclamen and mauve over the white walls, and a flowering creeper flamed with translucent orange candles. Emerald green parakeets screamed in the tree tops, and tree-rats chirruped like crickets.

In the evening, the village *lumbardar* wandered up to talk to David of the crops, the canal water and the price of wheat. The Punjabi is essentially a farmer, and for centuries he and his fathers before him have tilled the land, irrigating the crops with Persian wheels turned by oxen, camel or the family buffalo. The dried dung cakes, gathered usually by small girls with large shallow baskets, darting out after the passing carts, are still used for fuel, for plastering the floors and keeping the hookah alight. The winter is occupied with sugar-cane crushing and gur or shakkur making. In the non-cotton areas there is the paddy crop to be planted out, working knee deep in the flooded fields.

Ingenuous, credulous and fatalistic, the small farmer is at the mercy of any faction that cares to exploit him. In the last few years he has been living under the shadow of starvation. The much-advertised agrarian reforms have done little so far to free him from the feudal landlord system under which his grandfathers slaved. With the influx of refugees from across the border, the constant drain on the cultivable area due to the gradual encroachment of Thur and Sem, the waterlogging and salts menace that has claimed within the last ten years almost twenty thousand acres

of potential arable soil, there is not enough food-producing land for the needs of the people. Floods, failure of crops, smuggling, shortage of water are endured with patient stoicism, and with each new change in the administration they hope, "*Insh'allah*," for better days.

Our friend of the village asked us shyly if we would like to see a local hunt with greyhounds in the morning. His name was Nur Khan, and we promised to meet him outside his village at six o'clock. Many of the Punjabis keep greyhounds, much as the Pathans do bull terriers, but whereas the Pathan breeds his dog for fighting, the Punjabi uses his hounds for hunting.

We hurried along the uneven pathway to the rendezvous, the warm sunlight filtering into the cool of the early morning. It would have been impossible to mistake the way, for the yelping of dogs and the cries of their owners filled the air. Someone had come along with a *tubla*, a home made flute, and the whole scene was that of excited gaiety. A pack of village pi-dogs had been rounded up to beat out the sugar-cane, while the superior greyhounds were leashed in couples waiting quietly with their owners. We all set off, ourselves under the escort of Nur Khan, properly aware of the *izzat*, or respect to which he would henceforward be able to lay claim and of the potential added luxury of a cigarette or two. He finally posted himself with a great deal of ceremony along with his hounds behind some bushes a short distance from the patch of cane. His friends with their animals each chose a small bush or clump of *kikar*, where they squatted, forming a rough avenue of waiting dogs leading away from the *khet*, while the villagers and the pi's closed in on the cane from behind.

The moment they got into the sugar-cane bedlam broke loose. The men shouted encouragement, the dogs whined and yelped, and the greyhounds, tense and eager, strained at the leash. The moment an animal broke cover Nur Khan prepared to unleash his dogs, and just as the hare or jackal passed the bush he slipped the collar, and the dogs were off like a streak of lightning with that curious movement peculiar to the greyhound, when between strides his four slender legs seem gathered up underneath him. As soon as one field had been drawn the men moved

on to the next, and the same performance was repeated. The only game they will eat is winged, for rabbit or hare come under the same category as pig to the Muslim, and are virtually untouchable.

That evening we prepared to sit up on a *jheel* and try our luck. There is nothing quite so lovely and exciting as sitting waiting for the flighting duck on a cool autumn evening in the Punjab, unless it be setting out cubbing on a frosty September morning in the Border country of Scotland, the horses' hooves ringing crisply on the hard roads and echoing through the streets of a sleeping village.

We chose a clump of tall rushes overlooking a strip of shallow water with stubble sticking through it, a place beloved of teal and mallard. From the nearby villages floated the faint voices of men gathering their buffaloes for the night, or women calling to each other as they walked, full water-*chattis* balanced gracefully on their heads. The blue smoke from dung cooking-fires spiralled up into the still air, and the voice of the *mullah* rang out with a melancholy mystery from the tiny white mosque. Slowly the sounds died away. The sun laid a great sheet of gold over the water and now and then the shadowy form of a jackal slunk quickly between the rushes on the prowl for an odd duck lost in a previous shoot. Herons splashed down noisily on the water and big white water birds flapped their wings lazily. A jack snipe flashed like an arrow across our sights. Then suddenly, like the sound of a train in the distance, came the unmistakable beat of wings of a flight of duck. Down we went into the soft mud, but they flew on, high above our heads, the lovely V shape of their wings silhouetted against the green and lemon of the evening sky. At last a flight came in lower, banked steeply, stretching low across the water, looking to see if any others were already there. Finally, with a scuttle of wings they decided to land, skimming the open pools in a shining silver furrow—mallard—the iridescent green of the drake's ruff circling his proud and flexible neck.

I looked up and caught David's arm. "Look!" I whispered. High above us two solitary pink-feet flew heavily westward, necks thrust forward, making that wild and haunting cry heard from the Scottish lochs half across the world, and once heard never forgotten. We were stiff with cold and we hadn't fired a

shot, but, as in fishing, it is the joy of the chase that is most important: the loneliness and the solitude and the communion of the wild things when they are happy and undisturbed in their feeding grounds. We tramped back a few miles to the rest-house, picking our way by the stars, stopping now and then to watch another flight sweeping in for the night in the safe and friendly dark.

Next morning we stopped the car near Jhelum at the side of the Grand Trunk Road. A caravan of Ghilzais trekking southward from Afghanistan, one of hundreds making their yearly pilgrimage down to the plains, drew near, moving with slow and ponderous deliberation. An old woman, perhaps the matriarch of the tribe, sat poised on top of a collection of bedding strapped to the leading camel, fanning herself elegantly with all the grace of a Pompadour. The next camel on the string was laden with faggots for the fire, hanging from its neck a very new and shiny hurricane lantern.

One of the younger women hustled along a small flock of goats and sheep, waving a branch cut from a *kikar* tree and shrilling at them in Pushtu. Sauntering along behind her came a lovely creature, about sixteen years of age, with the straight, patrician features so often found in Powindah women. A brilliant cyclamen *chaddur* was thrown carelessly over her head, and a long wide black dress flowed almost to her feet, just showing a glimpse of baggy white-and-red patterned trousers caught in at the ankle. Two huge silver medallions decorated her bosom, and silver earrings fell in a festoon from her ears.

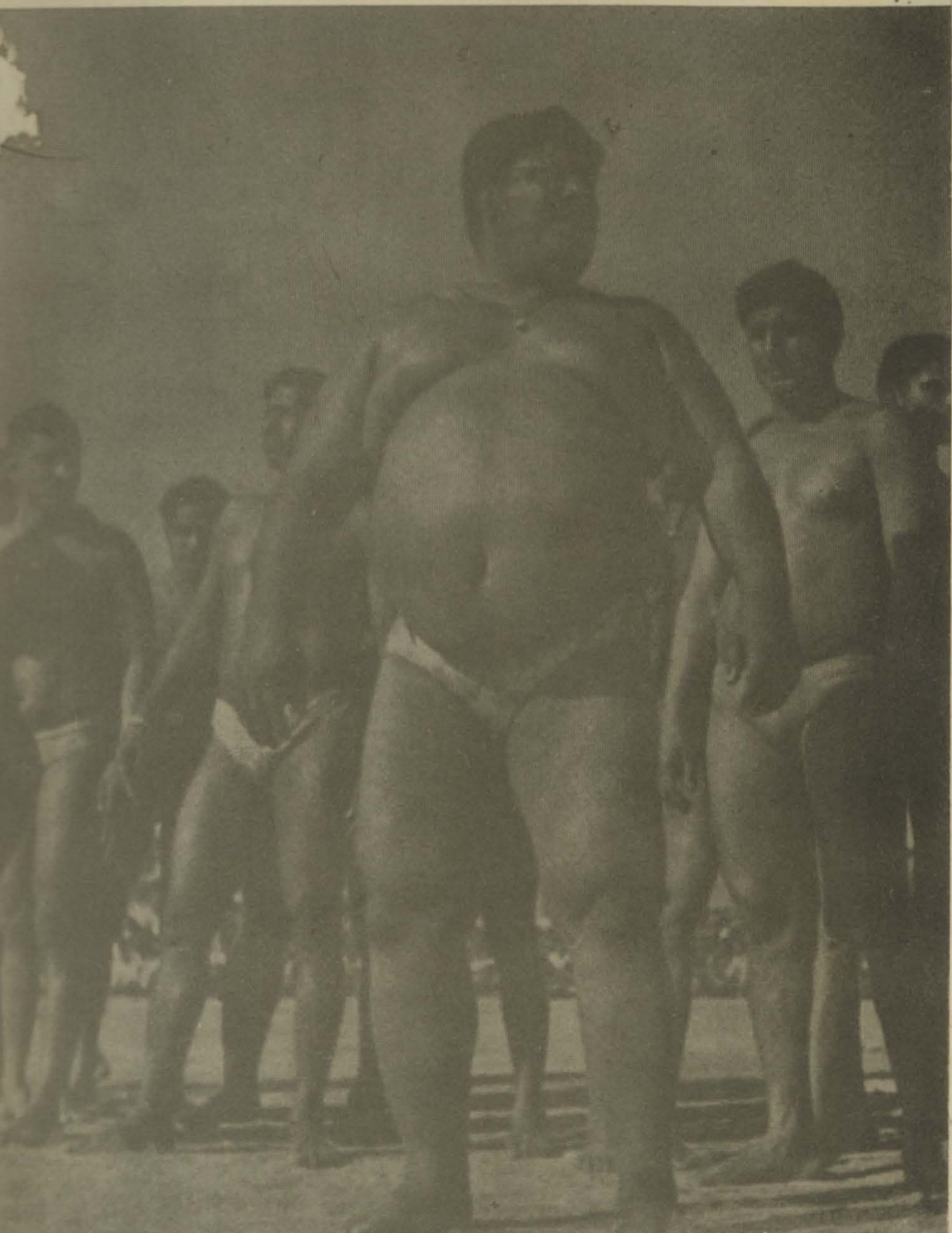
She was obviously waiting for a friend still further behind, and singing softly to herself she squatted down unself-consciously in the middle of the road and began to draw intricate and mysterious patterns in the white dust. Soon a vast American car appeared, driven uncertainly and very fast, with a screech of horn like the howling of a pack of jackals. Rising to her feet, she moved slowly and resentfully out of its path. There was a wildness about her almost animal, remote and untouched by civilization. So, we thought, might some goddess of old have looked down from Mount Olympus upon the follies of mankind. Her whole manner held a scorn, an almost total disbelief in the permanency of such insane mechanical contrivances; she seemed utterly dissociated from them and everything they represented, and betrayed indeed

much more interest in me, watching every movement from under her straight-cut fringe with shy and friendly curiosity.

Lunch we ate on the veranda of a tiny rest-house, set up on a point overlooking the surrounding country, while far off across the great vista of olive brown rose the blue wall of the snowbound Himalayas. In the grounds, shut in by a labyrinth of green, lay an old water tank, with steps leading down to its borders, small decorated turrets, and on the south side a cobbled elephant ramp. What shades moved in its cool viridian shadows, and what ghosts of pomp and riches must have mirrored their reflections in its still waters! Nearby an ancient *pipal* tree, its trunk twisted like candy, shaded the disused well, while above a hawk circled, endlessly waiting.

On the outskirts of a village we overtook a little cavalcade of Indian gipsies travelling round the countryside picking up odd seasonal jobs in the cotton-fields or during the sugar-crushing season. All their worldly possessions went with them, precariously balanced on the backs of tiny donkeys; surmounting a string bed or a bundle of quilts perched babies, pots and pans, a young goat, or perhaps two or three fluttering and squawking fowls. A final touch to this picturesque and colourful band was added by two large black bears, wearing leather collars with little brass bells, and nonchalantly trailed along by a tall old man who had much the air of an elderly retired businessman out exercising his dogs in the park. Although the people looked poor enough, the bears at least must have been extremely well cared for, for their shaggy coats were thick and glossy. One was very much larger than the other. The old man told us that he had brought them down from the mountains of Swat when they were cubs. They looked comparatively harmless, padding about on all fours, but when they stood up the bigger of the two was easily as tall as the man himself. The small one executed a fantastic, clumsy little dance for us, his bright, beady eyes fixed on the lump of sticky *ghur* that would be his reward.

Evening found us on a white ribbon of road flooded with moonlight, the hills of Attock rising sharp and flat in the distance, the country contorted into weird columns, ridges, peaks and canyons, eaten away by erosion into innumerable shells and shelves of uptilted, jagged forms. That night I lay on a *charpoy*



Bholu the Wrestler, Champion of Pakistan



The little fellow executed a clumsy dance for us

under a canopy of stars, as I had so often done before, with a great wind singing through the dark trees, their branches waving like seaweed or fine black lace against an opaque blue sky, while far below the bowl of the valley lay like a sea of warm ochre in the moonlight.

Early next morning we had reached Attock, gateway to the Frontier, where the Kabul and the Indus meet. There in the year A.D. 1581 the Moghal Emperor Akbar laid the foundation stone of the fort which still commands the river crossing, after his successful expedition against the Governor of Kabul. There to this day the inscription carved in marble over the Mori Gate reads: "Shield of the Monarchs of the World, King Akbar, may God enhance his splendour, *Allah-o-Akbar*, God is Great!"

Akbar's full name was Mohammad Akbar, called Jalaluddin —Glory of the Faith; and his reign, 1556-1605, synchronized nearly with that of Elizabeth of England. Indeed, to Akbar, two years after his building of the Fort, was to come one John Newbury, the first of many Englishmen, bearing a letter couched in the piquant and formal phraseology of the day, written by Queen Elizabeth to "the most invincible and most mighty Prince, Lord Zelabdim Echebar, King of Cambaia; Invincible Emperor", etc., with a request for safe conduct of her subjects:

> The great affection which our subjects have to visit the most distant places of the world (not without goodwill and intention to introduce the trade of merchandise of all nations whatsoever they can; by which means the mutual and friendly traffic of merchandise on both sides may come) is the cause that the bearer of this letter, John Newbury, jointly with those that be in his company, with a courteous and honest boldness do repair to the borders and countries of your empire. We doubt not but that your Imperial Majesty, through your Royal grace, will favourably and friendly accept him. And that you would do it the rather for our sake, to make us greatly beholding to your Majesty, we should more earnestly and with more words require if we did think it needful. But by the singular report that is of your Imperial Majesty's humanity in these uttermost parts of the world we are greatly eased of that burden, and therefore we use the fewer and less words. Only we request that because they are our subjects they may be honestly entreated and received and that in respect of the hard journey which they have undertaken to places so far distant it would please your

Majesty with some liberty and security of voyage to gratify it, with such privileges as shall to you seem good. Which courtesy if your Imperial Majesty shall to our subjects at our requests perform, We, according to our Royal honour, will recompense the same with as many deserts as we can.

And herewith we bid your Imperial Majesty to farewell.

On the north side of the fort stands the Begum Serai, used as a camping site during the construction of the main fort and later improved and enlarged by Jehangir for the fabulous Nur Jehan. In the shade of its walls lies an old graveyard, its headstones protruding like broken teeth from the rank grasses, a silent memorial to a hundred years of British struggle on the Frontier, and still bearing faintly the crests of many a famous regiment, the names of men who fell in a Frontier foray, and of their wives and children, whose devotion brought them out to die on an alien soil. Both David and I have a peculiar passion for old graveyards, and read into their simple inscriptions and dates of erection the dreadful brevity of a more poignant story than many a history book divulges. The pity of it is that so many of these once sacred places are falling into ruin. Their marble tablets are prised off, stones are carted away as so much building material, and no one seems to assume any responsibility for their upkeep. I sat there among those gentle shades of a past generation while the Indus rolled its way along the same wide channel Alexander followed, and remembered the lines from Stephen Spender's poem so extraordinarily apt:

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun they travelled a short while towards the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

With the decline and fall of the Moghal Empire has vanished all trace of Muslim culture, love of beauty and care for beautiful things. The poor are poorer and the rich richer, and the golden

chain that used to circle Jehangir's Palace in order that any one of his subjects could sound a bell at his bedside at any hour of the day or night should he require help or advice has given way to a maze of nepotism from the highest to the lowest, and the simple, direct approach is no more. British Imperialism, begun by Elizabeth of England, has been blamed for all the evils under which the whole sub-continent is labouring, and the lives of the men who fought and died that roads and railways could be built and land tilled and famine averted are reckoned as nought, and forgotten like the dead grasses waving between the gravestones beneath Attock Fort, or the old *serai* where "The Light of the World" lingered with her royal husband, wrote poetry, and by his side directed the affairs of their dominion.

A little above the bridge now spanning the river, Akbar established a ferry, importing a number of boatmen, or *mallahs*, from the Jamma, and, settling them on the other side of the river, bestowed on them in perpetuity the revenue of a village in the neighbourhood for their support. This is still enjoyed by their descendants, living in the village of Mallahitola, the "Colony of Boatmen".

Once across the Attock Bridge and I am back among the familiar things, the gold *kulah* and flying *lungi*, starched stiffly like a fan, the wide grey *mahzri* cloth *shalwar*, the embroidered waistcoat and fierce moustaches of the Pathan and the ever-present rifle slung over one shoulder. The Kabul River curves away in a swift, muddy coil on our right; the flat boats drift slowly downstream, piled with a cargo of green melons; the villages fly past, Akora Khattock and Zeramina, each with its laden ferry.

We push on to Nowshera, where I am to pick up my old bearer, Khuda Buksh, and I find him squatting outside the appointed meeting-place, *chelum* (the Pathan hookah) beside him, and a roll of bedding at his feet. There was a great reunion with handshaking all round, and Khuda Buksh hastened to unstrap his roll of blankets and produce *halva* and fruit from his mother and an embroidered *dopatta* from his wife. By this time we had attracted a small and intensely interested crowd. An old man with a bright, hennaed beard thrust his head in at the window and began a long conversation in Pushtu with David. Two black-turbaned Kabulis crossed the street, eager to see the fun, and a ragged little girl

with the face of a Moghal princess and a withered stump of an arm, seizing a heaven-sent opportunity, frantically agitated her tin begging bowl underneath my nose, chanting in a high, monotonous voice, "*Bucksheesh*, *sahib!* No father nor mother have I, and seven brothers and sisters. *Bucksheesh*, *sahib*, for the love of Allah!"

The owner of the café outside which the performance was taking place now arrived on the scene, elbowed the old man aside, shooed off the small girl, telling her in no uncertain terms what he thought of her ancestry and of the awful fate that awaited her should she importune the English *mem-sahib*, but I noticed he slipped an anna into her hand. We finally persuaded Khuda Buksh, beaming all over and thrilled with the excitement he was causing, to stow himself and his goods in the back of the car. David suggested a tankard of beer, and we thankfully pulled away in the direction of the Club, leaving a smiling, waving crowd behind us.

Nowshera, once a famous garrison town, lay drowsing in the hot sun, the unkept gardens and leprous walls of its shabby bungalows wearing an air of neglected and decayed gentility. The Club was a disappointment, and in spite of the refreshing beer we wished we hadn't come. The paint was chipped, the chair covers greasy and the fittings tawdry and uncared-for. An old bearer shambled forward, and with tears in his eyes talked eagerly of the *sahibs* who once clicked their heels on the polished floors. He had forgotten none of them, they were part of his life, and we hurried away, tipping him far more than we could afford, wondering what Pakistan had given him in their place.



Pathan with chelum.

Chapter 9

PIR SABAK

ACROSS the swift-flowing Kabul from Nowshera lay the old Sikh *girdwara* of Pir Sabak in which we were all housed, a vast two-storied building grouped round a central courtyard, and appropriated just before my arrival by the Government for use as an Agricultural Seed Farm. Part of the temple itself and the surrounding village had been destroyed at Partition, and a little more of its mud walls reverted to their natural element with each successive rainstorm. Hens and guinea-fowl fluttered and screamed in the once-sacred hall. Great iron gates were securely bolted and barred at night, for the local *zamindars*, having farmed the land for the last three years, were naturally a trifle reluctant to come to terms, and the Seed Farm was for the moment at least only there on sufferance. Every other day hordes of truculent Pathans armed to the teeth poured through the courtyard to hold long and tiresome arguments with the officials, who were timid and unhappy, and, fearing trouble, we were guarded at night by six *chaukidars* or watchmen, with rifles and a Sten gun.

There were neither fans nor light nor any form of sanitation or washing facilities. The walls were thin brick covered with plaster, the whole reinforced by iron girders, and unlike the thick mud walls of the village houses the brick seemed to attract and hold the heat like a furnace.

It also held a peculiar peril during earth tremors, as I discovered one night to my alarm and horror. I had just crawled carefully under my mosquito net when the whole building suddenly trembled and rocked like a house of cards. Khuda Buksh,

who had been saying good night, swayed, lost his balance and sat down promptly on the veranda. The field-hands, about fifty of whom slept on the roof above my head, poured in panic down the swaying staircase. In a matter of seconds the whole building was deserted, and Khuda Buksh was begging me to flee with the rest. Imprisoned in my green tent, and wearing under the thin sheet covering me extremely thin night attire, I was as far as I could see nicely balanced between what to a Pathan would have been the most gross display of immodesty, with consequences that could not be dismissed lightly (for I was the only woman in the building), and apparently certain death. Ignorant of the reality of the danger and unwilling to admit to fear, I clung to my modesty and stayed shivering in my bed, in spite of Khuda Buksh's violent entreaties, reflecting that no well-brought-up Muslim could have shown more regard for the proprieties. Of course, it all died away after a few more rumbles, and the terrified and shaken men duly returned to their roof, where they spent the rest of the night in noisy, and disturbing prayer.

At first we bathed in, cooked with and drank the water from the Kabul River, in which men, buffaloes and occasional crocodiles swam indiscriminately. The windows were high, without netting and barred with iron, so that if perforce we had to close them, there were only heavy wooden shutters which excluded even a breath of air. Khuda Buksh and I cooked extraordinary messes over an open fire in the kitchen, where the smoke, baulked for some reason of its normal exit through the chimney, blew back in a thick blue fog, so that every now and then we were forced to suspend operations while we rushed outside, half blinded, our eyes streaming.

Not by any means the least of the disadvantages of living at Pir Sabak was the fact that it lay on the opposite bank of the river to Nowshera, our only shopping centre, and therefore could be reached only by an extremely perilous and uncomfortable crossing in a *kishti*, or locally constructed flat-bottomed boat. While this vessel might have floated pleasantly enough on some placid mill pond or sleepy backwater, when thrust out on the fast, racing and turbulent grey waters of the Kabul, it made every expedition appear to me at least as a direct and wholly unnecessary temptation of Providence.

Apart from the risk to life and limb, the whole journey was liable to involve any amount of time up to a couple of hours at least. In the first place, owing to the strength and swiftness of the current, a straight crossing from point to point was unknown, and the resulting distance we might be carried down the river varied according to the power and experience of the oarsmen—this last being the deciding factor, as anyone was liable to be pressed into service or might simply decide to "have a go". Should one of the lads of the village, anxious to prove his mettle before a pair of black eyes smouldering beneath the scalloped edge of a *burqa*, take up an oar, he would apply himself to his task with such vigour as to defeat all efforts of his opposite number to keep up with him. Then, in spite of Gundar Shah's wild endeavours to swing over the tiller and thus right the balance, and fervent exhortations by all the passengers, the little craft would be carried circling wildly hundreds of yards downstream before it could make the other side. Gundar Shah was the official boatman, or *kishti-wallah*, but occasionally he took an oar himself and a tall, thin youth deputized, his *lungi* kilted up between his brown calves, and sporting a pair of sun-glasses, the silver label announcing their make still firmly attached to one lens.

I have seen the boat so loaded, with men perched along the gunwale like gulls on a herring drifter, interspersed with sacks of *gram*, baskets of fruit, pieces of meat or blocks of ice, tied up in a grubby *lungi*, used for every conceivable purpose from a garment to a hold-all, and possibly a sheep or a couple of goats; a central pyramid composed of what at first sight appears to be an intricate arrangement of scrap metal, but on closer inspection turns out to be a dozen or so bicycles piled on top of each other; while at one end the women squat, huddled together, alternately giggling and gasping, slim, hennaed hands clutching children, bundles and each other, until there remained literally only a couple of inches showing above the water. Obviously old Gundar Shah had not even a nodding acquaintance with the Plimsoll line. I have sat, clutching my seat, as two wild-looking Pathans nearly came to blows in midstream. I have crouched miserably in my seat of honour at the stern in the midst of a storm, the sky a brilliant orange, the steel-grey river whipped by a wind that sent great

yellow dust clouds rolling across the sky, almost obliterating the land.

Complaining one day to a friend in Nowshera of this irregular and uncertain service, he not only promptly put at my disposal a rubber dinghy, but volunteered to make the first crossing with me. This object we bore away joyfully in a *tonga*, and, having reached the river bank, dismissed the waiting ferry, to the pained surprise of Gundar Shah, and the three of us proceeded with fine nonchalance to inflate the dinghy. Naturally, this was an event of profound interest for the little group on the shore, who had never seen anything like it before, but who squatted around, proffering help and advice and fingering it all over. One of the villagers who kept me supplied with tomatoes, and an occasional and much-coveted block of ice, asked me dubiously if I expected to reach the other side in this fragile craft. On my smiling affirmative, he rolled his eyes heavenwards and piously murmured, "*Insh'-allah*" (if it is the will of God).

At last we decided that we were sufficiently inflated to launch forth, and pushed off amid many "*Bismillahs*" and not a few "*Toba! Toba!*" which can signify anything from "God forgive us" to "All is finished. We are now in the hands of Allah", and, rather clumsily disentangling ourselves from the mud and rushes bordering the shore, shot suddenly and precipitately out on the broad bosom of the Kabul. As far as the actual crossing was concerned the whole thing was an utter fiasco. We were carried merrily on downstream in spite of frantic paddling, and only made the opposite shore two or three miles down the river. We tried towing it back with the belt of my dress, but the banks were overgrown with a snarl of roots, and walking on the short, burned grass on top was little less than torture.

Undaunted by this escapade, and filled with delight at the ease with which it would be possible to travel down the river, my visitor conceived the hare-brained notion of making a trip next day down as far as Attock, a distance by water of about twenty-four miles, to which suggestion I weakly agreed, provided the faithful Khuda Buksh came with us for my own moral support.

It was comparatively cool when we left next morning. The trees fingered the dark water with their green, drooping branches, the sky was a restful grey, and the bottom of the boat, on which

one had perforce to sit, was delightfully chilled. No travellers exploring the Amazon could have set off with a greater sense of adventure than the three of us experienced, casting ourselves out in that ridiculous little rubber boat on the waters of the mighty Kabul. Idly we drifted off, the green banks slipping past on either side providing the same sense of exhilaration that one experiences when carried along in a train, or flying low over the patterned fields, borne as it were in a dream by some unseen power and yielding oneself voluptuously to the sensation without effort or volition.

Villages glided by, a jumble of sandy houses sheltered by the nodding plumes of palms; little groups of women, tiny animated blobs of colour, washing squealing babies or beating out the family clothes on flat stones in the shelter of a tiny inlet; crowds of small naked boys, their brown bodies flashing like seals, swimming out to the boat shrilling excitedly; men dropping their work and running along the banks, still clutching a knife or a hookah, or the skirts of their *lungis*, like an Edwardian belle her hobble skirts, shouting like children, and cheering us on our way.

At Zeramina all our friends were crossing in the ferry, so we stopped and chatted and they presented us with a couple of melons. Now and again we would get caught in a back current and be swept upstream again. There were quite sizeable rapids to negotiate, but the little dinghy bobbed over them like a dancing cork. So little control had we over its movements that I felt sometimes like Hans Andersen's little Toy Soldier, sailing down the gutter in the paper ship, holding himself bravely and stiffly to attention. Soon we passed wide, shallow native river boats, with enormous sails curved like scimitars and laden with a green honeycomb of melons.

One of the most exciting moments was the negotiation of the *kishti-phul*, or boat bridge, below Akora Khattock. The river seemed to rush through the narrow openings between the flat barges like a torrent—could we steer for one of these—a breathless moment as we shipped the sculls, glanced off the gunwale of one of the boats, then shot through and out at the other side like an arrow, our heads bent and my eyes at least firmly closed. The people on the bridge rushed from one side to the

other cheering like mad as our strange craft whirled on down the river.

The day grew hotter and hotter until it was almost impossible to touch the sides of the boat. Every now and then we were forced to use the pump to inflate our craft, which seemed to be developing a curious hollow in the centre. Finally, we came within sight of the Attock Bridge, the dark mass of the Fort looming over it, and there came to our ears the noise of the rushing and pounding of waters as the Indus raced down to meet the Kabul, swollen and fierce with melted snows from the Himalayas. We had originally intended going on to Attock, but Khuda Buksh thought otherwise. On land he was as brave as a lion, but seafaring was definitely not in his blood. We tried to reassure him that craft such as ours were able to survive even the Atlantic, but Khuda Buksh, never having seen the Atlantic or indeed any other sea, could visualize nothing more terrible than our present condition. He was also pining in the throes of a tentative love affair with Nowsha Bibi, the daughter of the gardener at Pir Sabak, who, having fled home to her parents after a disastrous marriage with an old man of seventy-three, was on the look-out for a successor. Khuda Buksh's own wife, still childless and living with his parents in Dera Ismail Khan, was literally out of sight and out of mind, and the prospect of the abrupt termination of his delightful dalliance with the attractive Nowsha reduced him to despair.

Partly owing to his obstinacy, the speed of events carried us between a large rock and the shore, and we found ourselves caught up in a gigantic whirlpool. Round and round we went accompanied by floating melon rinds, pieces of driftwood, weird polyps of the river that might have been anything, and the bloated carcase of a dog, describing a continual circle like a witch's cauldron. Try as we would, it seemed impossible to get out of it. In the end I had visions of circling thus eternally, round and round for ever. However, at last, by dint of Herculean efforts on the part of my now somewhat exhausted visitor, and Khuda Buksh's fear of a watery grave, which lent him a final burst of superhuman strength, we made the shore, burned to cinders, but at least feeling that we were the first to travel down the Kabul in a rubber dinghy.

On the road we hailed a passing lorry, and complete with our

deflated craft made the journey back to Nowshera. We were careful this time to start off well above Pir Sabak, so that we drifted diagonally across the river and landed more or less below the Girdwara.

Back in my temporary home, I found my fame was spreading alarmingly fast, and a constant stream of patients poured in to my little dispensary, where I dealt hopefully and prayerfully with every ailment, it seemed to me, that could be known to medical science. The first time I was called out to the adjacent village —incidentally, one of the poorest and most backward I had visited—the Director of the Seed Farm anxiously begged me not to venture forth without a *chaukidar* complete with rifle. I indignantly repudiated such a suggestion, assuring him that my calling was such as to render me virtually inviolate (in my heart of hearts I had not too much faith in the efficacy of my philosophy). I set off accompanied by the faithful Khuda Buksh, who translated from Pushtu into Urdu for me, and the husband of my patient grinning approval. It seemed a long way with the temperature at one hundred and sixteen, and as we trudged through the maze of narrow streets and lanes, criss-crossed with open drains, I was to come to know so well, I must admit to a slight qualm at the fierce, bearded faces that peered at me curiously from doorways and alleys. That was, however, the only time I felt the least apprehension during the whole of my journeyings on the Frontier. Soon calls began to come in from further afield, and from Zeramina came an offer of horses for myself and Khuda Buksh if I would come out and attend to their people.

Next morning I was duly awakened at four a.m. by a familar voice calling:

"*Assalaam aleikum*, *Begum Sahib!*"

"*Waleikum salaam*, Khuda Buksh!"

The dim light of a wavering hurricane lantern passed the green cave of my mosquito net, and Khuda Buksh staggered by on his way to the kitchen. It was still quite dark and the wide arches of the veranda on which I slept were each a brilliant fresco of sky and stars.

I crawl reluctantly out from under my gauze tent and thrust my feet into *chaplis*, which I invariably forget to shake, although

warned repeatedly of the perils of lurking scorpions. The tin bath is just large enough to accommodate me. I can even submerge if cunningly folded up. Weeks of practice have made me an adept at this, but the whole performance involves the most ghastly creaking and grating of tin against stone. That morning the water was barely adequate. As our water-carrier was as communicative as a Trappist monk, I never seemed to make much headway in my efforts to keep him up to scratch.

We were now using, instead of the muddy water from the Kabul, well water from inside the Girdwara. This well, unused for three or four years, was suddenly opened up one day unknown to most of us, and we had all consumed a considerable quantity before someone had the bright idea of disinfecting it or the awful possibilities consequent upon such indiscriminate and thoughtless drinking had dawned on us. A miserable field-hand had been therefore entrusted with the task of its purification, which he accomplished by the simple expedient of emptying into it several pounds of permanganate of potash. The result of this had been startling in the extreme, and for days on end we were drawing off pails of exotic purple fluid before it finally paled through lilac to a delicate pink and finally regained its former colourlessness.

Meanwhile, blessed, wonderful Khuda Buksh, who, in spite of having been summarily dismissed from the police force for striking a superior officer, and whiling away much of his time in trying to persuade me of the ease with which we could both amass untold wealth by opium-smuggling, is the most devoted of bearers, has the porridge ready. Even with Scotland simply a remote, jagged piece of land on the map of one's memory, we still contrive the traditional breakfast. We buy it in tins labelled incongruously "Made in Rotterdam". A bat circles the room in a last nervous flight. The stars dissolve into a sky that is lemon and pink and blue, milky like an opal.

A clatter in the courtyard and I check my little bag hurriedly: syringe, disinfectant, forceps—I have discovered a latent flair for extracting teeth. Have I allowed for every contingency? Thank heavens they have sent a different animal this morning. Two days ago there arrived a meek-looking little strawberry roan, as fat as butter, but with an ability for creating deliberate mischief few could equal. When I leaned graciously from my saddle to exchange

greetings with strangers on the road, she sidled round and tried to kick them. She fought for her bit every inch of the way, and when, having thoughtfully removed bridle and saddle for her greater comfort at the end of the journey, we attempted to replace them, she rose on her hind legs and pawed the air like a stallion.

To-day there is a nice brown mare who responds affectionately to my advances. I mount, I hope gracefully, at least clearing the high Pakistani saddle, so marvellously comfortable after the glacier-like flatness of our English counterpart. Khuda Buksh follows on a spirited chestnut, reins held high in one hand, the other clutching my precious bag. I get a tremendous thrill out of all this, and am filled momentarily with the true spirit of all pioneers, until my horse shies violently at the sudden appearance of a wandering buffalo and I come out of the clouds and down to earth—thank goodness, not literally.

It is gloriously cool in the early morning, with a light breeze stirring the few straggling trees. They all look twisted and warped, as though unable to grow straight and tall in the blistering heat. On the outskirts of the village the men are already busy winnowing the wheat, which has previously been trampled down for days by the patient, plodding feet of circling oxen and donkeys. Now light whorls and clouds of glittering gold-dust rise in ever-changing patterns, each superimposed upon the last, like those magically-induced snowstorms in a Victorian paperweight.

Just now there is some colour in the landscape. Later the sun will drain it flat and white. Behind us the great Kabul River slips swiftly south to join the Indus. The scrubby bushes are green and the distant mountains a cool, slatey blue. A couple of oxen pass, patterned like Dalmatians, sleek and stolid, jingling their necklaces of tinkling brass bells and shaking the strings of turquoise-coloured beads as they are led off to be harnessed to the primitive wooden plough. They look very gay and exotic, and I think what fun it would be if our dull Ayrshires and Aberdeen Anguses could be similarly adorned.

The next minute two enormous lizards dart out from a dusty clump of cacti, rustling the fragile yellow flowers that look as though they were made of wax. They slither up a tree-trunk and vanish into a hole. Above, the kites glide with great, still, ragged

wings, waiting for the death that will be theirs some time soon, to-day, to-morrow. . . . We leave the village and with it the last of these enormous Kabuli dogs, fiendishly fierce and nearly all infected with rabies.

Along the track, for there is no road, one is caught up again in the timelessness of this strange country. We pass groups of great, ugly water-buffaloes with their opaque blue eyes giving one the impression that they are all blind. Herds of goats of all colours are busily tearing the last shred of green from the gaunt trees and low camel-thorn, their graceful ears hanging like orchids, mottled brown and white; the inevitable small boy in attendance, fantastically Biblical in ragged clothes, a gold-embroidered cap thrust on his matted black hair. Sometimes a thread of music follows us, a series of notes repeated over and over again in melancholy reediness and from a home-made flute.

Now and again we skirt a lonely graveyard, the graves built in untidy heaps, flat, jagged headstones angled this way and that without any attempt at order, and the entire absence of trees, flowers or any green thing lending an even deeper poignancy to its desolation.

Hitherto the track has been wildly uneven, but from now on there is some reasonably good ground in front of us, and this is where we throw dignity to the winds and indulge in one mad and glorious gallop. Khuda Buksh is a fiend for speed, and as I snatch a glance behind, consumed with fear for the safety of my medicines, he comes pounding along shouting:

"*Aur tez, Begum Sahib! Aur tez!*" (Faster, Begum *Sahib*! Faster!)

Not to be outdone, I comply, and we rein in only as Zeramina comes into sight.

The mounting sun fingers the whiteness of its mosque. Layers of mud roofs garland the pencilled minarets crowning the small hill on which they rest. Below us a stream meanders in muddy density, cutting a sharp channel through the thick clay soil. Here and there groups of palms lean elegantly on the wind, crested with delicate, springing plumes.

Izat Khan, the *lambardar*, or head man of the village, has walked out to meet us and we exchange the traditional Pushtu greeting:

"May you never feel fatigue! Are you happy? Are you fresh and strong?"

We are hot and tired and thirsty, but we smile and nod in reply. From then on we have an almost triumphal procession, twisting and turning between the high-walled houses, stopping every now and then beside little groups of men who rise from their *charpoys* with solemn courtesy. They are so glad to see me that I am filled with an abysmal sense of my own inadequacy.

There are scarcely any women to be seen, only the occasional flowering in a doorway of a shy, hastily-withdrawn profile. Not so the little girls, who are consumed with curiosity to see this "Doctor *Sahib*" who is free to wander around with her face uncovered; and they explode with riotous and unseemly mirth before the sight of my riding breeches.

At last we arrive before the great wooden gates leading into the courtyard of the house of Izat Khan. We gladly dismount and the horses are led away into a shady corner. *Charpoys* are awaiting us, covered with beautifully embroidered bedspreads. The formula on these occasions is always the same. First sherbet, which is simply sugar mixed with water, followed by Pakistani tea, prepared with sugar and milk already added and served from red-and-white flowered Russian teapots.

Finally, the Pathan *chelum* is passed round, and to the astounded newcomers it is proudly explained that I have smoked a *chelum* for over two years, that I never smoke cigarettes, and that I do not find it too strong. They chatter about it like children and it immediately creates a bond of friendship between us, as I explain that I am a Scottish Pukhtoon.

As the last curl of smoke spirals upwards I am escorted to the zenana, where I cannot yet accustom myself to the incredible number of women who seem to arrive, nor to the complete lack of privacy. My visit usually begins with a tolerable amount of calm and restraint on both sides. There are perhaps not more than a couple of women in the small room with its shallow shelves built into the wall, holding an assortment of carefully hoarded chinaware, the colours rich against the harled grey mud. A couple of *charpoys*, a small table standing unevenly on the earth floor, and perhaps a painted tin chest or two comprise the furnishings.

My first patient has been ill for a couple of years. She is thin to the point of emaciation. I try to convince her that she cannot possibly hope to recoup her strength all at once, and to imbue her with the necessary confidence and strength to continue the treatment. By this time a small girl has appeared brandishing a *barbosa*. She is duly deputed to fan me, which she does with infinitely more zeal than dexterity. This involves a great deal of giggling and overt glances at her less enterprising friends, who, encouraged by her boldness, are clustered round the doorway, scuffling and nudging each other, devouring the whole spectacle with unabashed curiosity.

Soon a slight error of judgement ends in disaster and I am hit smartly over the head. I am about to dismiss the incident as negligible when Mamma darts out from a corner, and, snatching the fan from her unfortunate child, roundly scolds her and proceeds to demonstrate just how it should be done. Nevertheless, in the midst of this slight fracas I firmly resolve to remain cool, calm and collected. I have with me a neatly tabulated list of those patients I have already seen at the village, with names, illnesses and treatment given or prescribed. I am justly proud of this orderliness and resolved to deal with them strictly in rotation.

As I charge my syringe, I am uneasily aware that somehow there has occurred a further infiltration, and that at least four new faces are gazing at me from across the table. In the time that it takes me to turn my back to the audience and give the injection I realize that where there were four there are now eight, and so it goes on. My carefully prepared list and strict impartiality are not looked upon with great enthusiasm. They are all so desperately anxious to attract attention that to them the prolonged examination of one denotes nothing less than rank favouritism.

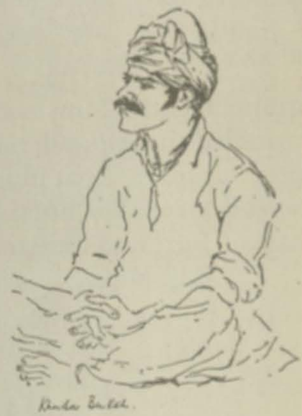
There are now added babes in arms, old women and a succession of children with bad eyes. I struggle on manfully. My handmaiden with the *barbosa* has long since abandoned her post and I am literally pouring with sweat. Just as I reach breaking-point my friend Izat Khan appears in the doorway. He rescues me, either out of pity for my plight or from pressure from without in the shape of the male patients, who have doubtless decided that their turn is overdue.

The men are shy and orderly and answer my questions briefly

and intelligently. I am revived with a farewell *chelum*, the horses are saddled and we walk them to the outskirts of the village before taking our leave. That morning on our way back we were caught in a sandstorm. The horses hated it, and I felt like an Arab in the Sahara as I ground the gritty particles between my teeth.

Chapter 10

PESHAWAR



My last night at Pir Sabak very nearly ended in disaster. Having just settled down on my shrouded *charpoy* on the veranda, exhausted with packing and a round of highly emotional farewells, I heard in the silence the sound of stealthy footsteps on the stairs. Now, the veranda was L-shaped, the shorter leg ending at the kitchen, my sitting-room in the right-angled corner, and my bed at the beginning of the longer leg. Khuda Buksh was sleeping on the roof as usual, and at first I thought the owner of the feet was also proceeding to the roof. But he came slowly along the veranda and passed my bed, in which I was lying holding my breath. I called out: "Who are you? What do you want?" But the shadowy figure padded quietly on towards the door of my room, and, bending down, seemed to be fumbling with the lock. What my next move should be I could not quite decide. Clearly, it was out of the question either to rise and confront the intruder or yet to proceed to the roof in search of Khuda Buksh, nor did the situation seem to warrant shrieks for help. I experienced, too, an overwhelming curiosity to know just what the gentleman was up to.

I then unwittingly precipitated the climax of the whole affair, for it occurred to me that a word of Pushtu might have the desired effect where Urdu had obviously failed.

"*Larsha!*" (Go away), I called imperiously, glaring nervously through my net. This certainly startled my visitor, who wheeled quickly and began to beat a retreat back past my bed. At the same moment I heard the violent scrape of a *charpoy* on the roof and a rush of feet on the stairs. Khuda Buksh, alert as he doubtless had been when in the police force, came hurtling down the

stairs and flung himself upon the intruder. A fearful struggle ensued, and, knowing Pathans, and Khuda Buksh in particular, I was terrified lest he simply kill him out of hand. Just as Khuda Buksh seemed on the point of administering the *coup de grâce* the whole building seemed to come alive with Pathans in eager anticipation of a fight. Down the stairs hustled half a dozen field-hands, two rather sleepy and ineffectual *chaukidars* clutching their rifles uncertainly, the owner of a Sten gun, bearing in the other hand his hookah, and lastly, pushing his way through the throng, clad in striped pyjama trousers, his shirt flapping outside them, came a young and very nervous Agricultural Assistant, calling for mercy and begging Khuda Buksh not to despatch his victim. I added my pleas to his, and very reluctantly Sir Galahad rose to his feet. Thank heavens he hadn't had a knife with him or it would have been all over long ago. It transpired that the poor little man was a new Field Assistant, who, having risen in the night to answer a call of nature, had on his return journey completely lost his way in the labyrinthine darkness of the temple.

Early next morning we piled into an open Air Force truck on its way up to Peshawar, and upon whose driver the owner of the rubber dinghy had prevailed to give us a lift. Khuda Buksh was a trifle depressed at the thought of leaving his sweetheart, but I had finally persuaded him to postpone immediate action regarding the taking of another wife until he talked the matter over with his present one, and on my promising to take him with me as far as Dera Ismail Khan his youthful spirits soon rose, ebullient as ever.

This was to be my first sight of Peshawar, premier city of the Frontier, for nearly two years, but a Peshawar which still seemed incomprehensibly home. Of the whole of West Pakistan, perhaps the Frontier alone has succeeded in preserving its integrity, its racial oneness. The story of the North-West Frontier Province and of the tribes that inhabit it is bound up indissolubly with its wild and lawless past, and with the passage of countless long-forgotten civilizations, Bhuddist and Hindu, Greek, Persian, Mongol and Turk. The geographical construction of what we now call Pakistan has been largely responsible for its history. As her rivers gouged out their beds between the tumbled mass of

mountain barriers that are her frontiers, so through the snow-bound Himalayas, the great Hindu Khush, the hills of Kabul and the Ghazni highlands swept a long procession of conquerors, pilgrims and settlers.

The Frontier is bounded on the north-west by the towering wall of the Himalayas, running from Afghanistan to Assam for a distance of sixteen thousand miles. Peshawar itself, lying only five hundred miles from the Oxus, is the Pushpapura of the ancients, while near the city on the road to Kabul still stands the Kanishka *stupa*, named after the most famous of the Kushan or Indo-Scythian kings, of whom Huen Tsang, the Chinese Marco Polo, wrote: "The king of Kapisa, a devout Buddhist of a brave and impetuous disposition . . . rules over a dozen kingdoms."

At the beginning of the historic period, over the mountains in the north came the Persians under their King Darius, to be followed in the fourth century B.C. by Alexander the Greek, that prototype of all invaders, of whom Plutarch wrote with an implied criticism still applicable to his kind in the twentieth century: "It was just and lawful, it seemed, to go about harassing and destroying those nations that had never offended him, and upon whom he had no claim." Burning the ancient city of Persepolis and obliterating the last remnant of the Empire of the Sassanides, he entered northern India through the valley of the Kabul in order to avoid an encounter with the fierce Aparotae holding the Khyber, who are believed to be the ancestors of the Pathans of to-day. Although four years later the legendary hero lay dead in Babylon, he left scattered along the whole Indus Valley relics of his presence, and one is even now strangely moved by the sudden vision of a Greek profile in the West Punjab and the Frontier hills.

Next in order came Mahmoud of Ghazni, and before the days of the Norman Conquest he had ten times descended with his Turks and laid waste vast areas of the country.

In 1504, out of Ferghana in Turkestan came Babur the Jagatai Turk, his mother a descendant of Ghengis Khan, and he himself sixth in succession to Tamerlane the Great, to found with a mingling of Turki, Mongol and Persian blood what is now called the Moghal Empire, and to be the first of that long line of historic names whose sonorous syllables flow from the tongue like the



A shaft of sunlight filters into the street of the fruit-sellers in Peshawar City





The Peshawar Vale Hunt: (Above) *John Dent, the Master, with hounds in the kennels.* (Below) *A meet at the Grass Farm, Peshawar*

symphonic variations on a theme: Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Shahjehan, Jehangir and Aurangzeb.

Like flood waters seeking the easiest and most indefensible channels in a river bed, so the invaders chose the only possible way through the passes in the mountains. Thus it was that the belt of Tribal Territory that is now part of the North-West Frontier Province time and again received their first impact. As the strangers came and went, so the Pathans remained, and the Frontier became the hunting ground of these wild and ruthless sons of the Prophet.

Their home, the Frontier Province, stands in relation to Pakistan, both in the characteristics of her people and the nature of her terrain, much as Scotland and in particular the Scottish Highlands do to England. The Pathans, bound together by a common language and religion, the same customs and mode of life, are none the less distinct in their tribal divisions. Pushtu is the Gaelic of Bruce and Wallace, and the difference between the Afridi and Mohmand way of wearing the *chaddur* or tying the *lungi* as decisively marked as the clan tartans. Amid the barren Frontier hills living is hard, and the race is to the strong. The Pathan is as punctilious over his religion as the most sanctimonious Scot, and contrives to combine it paradoxically with the same lusty enjoyment of the world, the flesh and the devil, his three material gods, *zan*, *zar*, *zamin*—women, gold and land.

He is as canny and cautious in business as an Aberdeenshire farmer, but hospitable to a degree, and as staunch in friendship as he is cunning in enmity. Imbued with all the swaggering braggadocio of a Gascon, his awareness of beauty will make him stick a rose behind his ear, invest his savings in an elaborately-embroidered waistcoat or an expensive *kulah* (the tight-fitting cap worn under the turban) woven with gold thread for "Id". He will train a bull terrier bred for fighting, or stake five hundred rupees on the outcome of a *battera*, or quail fight. He loves loot and the prospect of stealing a march on a rival, just as much as the Border reivers did, who spent their lives in plundering the English in quick forays, carrying off the fat cattle and the women to their fortified strongholds; and he is as reckless in war and as ardent in love as ever was young Lochinvar.

These were the people described for me so vividly many

years ago by a cousin who, fresh from Sandhurst, had gone straight out to the Frontier, then a proving-ground for young officers. Gordon served his apprenticeship at a time when every Pathan tribe was busily engaged in fighting privately among themselves or publicly against the irksome restraint imposed upon them by the covenanting sons of Imperialism. Our reconnaissance parties slept in what he called with morbid humour "graves", slit trenches dug at night as a protection against the sniper's bullet. Animated drawings of his men, whom he obviously adored, adorned the Christmas cards that were more often than not the sole indication of his continued existence, and something of his enthusiasm and the patent spell that the Frontier cast over him remained with me secretly throughout the years, a kind of faint family link with a life that had almost vanished by the time I got there, but whose echoes lingered like a far-off battle-cry for those who came after.

Since Partition in 1947, and the consequent abrupt removal of the Pathan's hereditary national sport, it has become increasingly obvious that the North-West Frontier Province is destined to play a vital and prominent part in the development of Pakistan. Although civilization is reaching out her ever lengthening tentacles into the fastnesses of the barren Frontier hills with new schools, dispensaries and industrial and agricultural farms, there remains an undercurrent of nostalgia for the "bad old days", when every man carried a rifle as soon as he could hold one and each rocky defile was a sniper's paradise. There is a natural suspicion, too, hard to eradicate, of anything that appears to threaten their most precious possession—freedom.

For the first time in history a sense of unity is really emerging on the Frontier. Family feuds are dying out. There is a marked eagerness to share in the dividends promised. Peaceful penetration is the aim of the Government, and so far it has worked remarkably well, although it is a delicate task to educate an essentially primitive people to take advantage of all the fine new schemes for development of what was at the inception of Pakistan a deficit province with an illiteracy rate of ninety per cent. The Pathan is at the crossroads, and new currents of thought and behaviour are breaking through the rigid traditional structure of Muslim social and family life. The craze for speedy modernization,

however, can be a dangerous one, and like a horse that has taken the bit between its teeth, one never knows where it will end up.

Perhaps one day a modern hotel will rise above Jamrud, and carefully-preserved native villages will attract a stream of visitors enthusing over the cute *charpoys* and hookahs, filing through a neat turnstile to pay a few annas for admittance; for the Americans, turning the tables, have discovered Pakistan, and even now painted jeeps are tearing madly through the dusty roads brimming over with smooth young men in flowered college shirts and white forage caps, part of the U.S.A.'s technical aid outfit. The Powindahs will no doubt live in a reserve, losing, like their Red Indian counterparts, their morals, their traditions and their character once they become tainted with the vices of the West. A *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere will hang over the Street of the Story-tellers in Peshawar City, where grimy Pathans of uncertain ancestry will dispense, as their Iraqi brethren do to-day, Coca-Cola, chewing gum and funnies, in place of silver *tawiz* and green tea. I can only breathe a sigh of relief at the thought that I shall not be there to see it happen.

Whatever the changes two years have brought forth, the Frontier for me is still the Frontier, and the elaborate hydro-electric schemes, in all the glory of shining penstocks and giant turbine alternators, are only a stone's-throw in time from the tiny picquet posts strung out along the watching peaks above; from the weathered stones of ancient Ghandara sleeping in the hillside above the rushing confluence of tailrace and spillway; and the New Frontier University in Peshawar only an exciting innovation in the lives of a people who would still rise as one man to the call of *Jehad*, as indeed they did four years ago over the Kashmir issue; and the electric lighting, the tap-water supplies to the villages, mere scratches made on the hard, polished core of centuries of strife and bitter living.

Here at least are regions still outside the scope of guide-book and conducted tour, a land that is still primarily a man's world, into the bare waste heart of which the casual stranger can seldom penetrate; where habits and codes have altered little with the passing years and the present reforms; where excitement and a sense of danger are still intrinsic to a fundamentally warlike people. Here are the rocks of Eliot's Wasteland, the great stretches

of olive scrub and camel-thorn, the grotesque shapes of squat, stunted trees and boulder-strewn mountains, where it is still possible to hear occasionally

> The flying bullet down the pass
> That whistles shrill, "All flesh is grass."

As we rattle in through the gates that are still trailing loops and coils of rusty barbed wire, the heat rises in a luminous dazzle from the road, the flat white buildings seem alive with moving particles of light, and the pencilled shadow of an archway springs up, black against their brilliance. Tiny open shops, spilling their contents out into the street, stretch back into dim, mysterious caverns where bearded Pathans crouch smoking pottery *chelums*, the Pathan type of hookah, with tall slender *seraks* of bamboo ornamented with silver or copper wire, in the midst of bales of silk, the gleam of burnished copper, the soft sheen of silver or glowing blues, greens and siennas of bold hand-made pottery. The city itself as distinct from the cantonment is composed of a labyrinth of narrow alleys, pierced at intervals by long pencil shafts of sunlight, each street the home of a single craft, even to the Quissakhwani Bazaar, the Street of the Story-tellers. Business is done over endless cups of green tea, brewed in exquisite blue- or red-flowered Russian teapots, their lids anchored to the handles with loops of delicate silver chain. On my very first visit I had sidled timidly through the bazaar, and so impressed had I been that I must at all costs keep my face covered that I peered nervously over an improvised veil, and was taken by some passers-by for a Persian (much to my secret delight). But now a simple "*Stare mab sheb!*" brings smiles and an answering greeting, for the Pathan is by nature courteous, and confronted boldly, like the proverbial nettle, he will respond with friendship.

Khuda Buksh has gone off to smoke a *chelum* with some pals of his inside a teashop. The truck has left us on the outskirts of the city and will leave my luggage at the hotel for me, so I wander down the narrow streets and stop to buy some Peshawari tobacco, piled in pyramids of gold and brown in shallow raffia baskets. Usually Pathans carry their own tobacco around with them in a *kaisora*, or little bag drawn in with cord at the top and often

decorated with bobbles of wool and gold beads. Sometimes these are made with an outer cover of lace, hand-crocheted by the women in the village, and seem strangely out of place dangling from a strong brown wrist, oddly reminiscent as they are of the bags in which we used to carry our dancing pumps. The hot air is strung with the clamour of excited voices shouting greetings in harsh guttural Pushtu, the deafening clanging of *tonga* bells, the staccato clatter of their ponies' hooves, the bleating of frightened goats, and the insistent hooting of vehicles inextricably jammed in the narrow street.

Through Peshawar on their long trek south come Powindahs, or nomadic gipsies from Kabul. The women are fabulous Augustus John figures in wide, flowing skirts, moving with a robust, inherited grace; their hair an elaborate arrangement of tiny plaits; round their necks great silver *tawiz*, holding charms against illness, and often the size of a cigarette case; while their ears, wrists and ankles are adorned with silver ornaments. The men are great, fierce-looking fellows with black turbans and velvet waistcoats bordered with gold and silver thread. Here are Uzbeks, although scarcer than they used to be, in gorgeously-embroidered dresses over high leather boots; Mongols from Turkestan, their flat, yellow faces smiling over a crazy pyramid of karaculi hats, and tall, handsome Pathans from Tribal Territory, swaggering along in great, baggy trousers with all the insouciance of a d'Artagnan. One end of their turbans, stiffly starched, stands up like an enormous cockade at the side of the gold *kulah* round which it is bound, while the other flies elegantly over one shoulder, over which is probably slung a rifle or the long-shafted, beautifully carved axe. Perhaps the Pathan carries a cage of fighting quail dangling from one wrist, and almost certainly a flower thrust rakishly behind one ear. Perfume is like a drug to a Pathan, and they are among the chemists' best customers when it comes to disposing of luxurious bottles of French perfume. Many a wealthy *khan* is smothered in "My Sin" or "*Je Reviens*" emanating from a tiny wad of cotton-wool tucked behind his ear.

Reluctantly I drag myself away from the city, for I had arranged with Ronnie, my photographer friend from Karachi, to write a feature on the Peshawar Vale Hunt before I left for Kohat, and back in my hotel, stretched out under the welcome fan, I pore

over the entrancing book of the Hunt, lent to me by the present Master, the Foreword to which reads:

> It is fact, I believe, that in the year A.D. 978, Sabaktagin, Governor of Khorasan, garrisoned Peshawar with 10,000 horses. To this day the inhabitants of the district keep hawks and greyhounds. It may be that mounted hunting parties were a common sight in these parts in the tenth century, and that we are only treading in the footsteps of Alexander, Tarpal, Sabaktagin, Mahmoud or Hari Singh when we go hunting nowadays.

The early history of the Hunt is inextricably linked with that of the Frontier itself, the Border tribes and the expeditions against them. In the sixties of the last century, Peshawar was a Frontier garrison town with a permanent force stationed there. The first record of hunting in the Vale is of a regimental pack, the "Bobbery" pack of the Hussar Regiment, stationed at Peshawar in 1863. In November, 1865, the 19th Foot arrived with a pack taken over from the 51st Regiment, and for the next two years this pack, under the name of the "Green Howard Hounds", hunted the country close to the cantonments, where there was an abundance of jackal, commonly known as "jack".

In 1867 hounds went with the regiment to Nowshera and hunted two days a week, one at Nowshera and the other at Charsadda. However in 1868 the 19th Foot moved to Rawalpindi, where hunting was impossible, and in the following year they were ordered back to England. Before leaving the country, they made over the pack to Peshawar on the understanding that a hunt should be maintained there in perpetuity. So on February 1, 1870, the first meet of the Peshawar Vale Hunt was held at Daoudzai Bridge, and from that day to this continuous records exist of each succeeding season.

In those early days of the Peshawar Vale Hunt the men who rode hard to hounds twice in the week spent the remaining five days in hunting and being hunted by a very different kind of game: in skirmishes among the Frontier hills or sorties from some lonely picquet against a marauding band of tribesmen. As roads, railways and canals were being constructed, it was their duty to protect and keep open those parts already built and pave the way for the next hundred yards or so. In 1877 almost the whole

garrison of Peshawar was out against the Jowakai Afridis. In 1880 came the Afghan War, and the hounds were taken to Kabul. With the disaster of Maiwind, the hounds narrowly escaped being put down, and were only saved at the eleventh hour and finally brought back to Peshawar. In 1898 subscribers from Jamrud in the Khyber hacked over to meets with a cavalry escort for protection. In 1909 an officer coming from Jamrud was shot just outside the cantonment.

In 1915 hounds ran from Mathra Jheel across the Kabul River and three miles over the Frontier. Political tension ran high in those days, and the field was asked politely but firmly to return to British territory while the Hunt Staff and a detachment of the Khyber Rifles collected hounds in the hills. The last Afridi rising against Peshawar was as recent as 1930, which accounted for the loss of one day's hunting during that season, and for the next two seasons no fixture cards were issued for security reasons, and a cavalry escort formed part of the field. The Taru side was also closed in 1930 owing to the presence of dacoits in the reed beds. Ladies were allowed to hunt for only one month in the season, and revolvers were carried by order!

The Hunt carried on nobly up to and after Partition, but in 1948 finances were low and there was grave doubt as to whether it would be possible to maintain the Hunt. The C.-in-C., Sir Douglas Gracey, however, made an appeal which resulted in approximately twenty-eight thousand rupees being raised from Army units and ordinary public subscribers. With this help, eight couple of hounds were imported from the United Kingdom, as the standing pack was small and in need of new blood, none having been imported since before the war.

Now the Hunt is run by a Committee, of which the President, since Partition, has always been the local Divisional Commander, and no major decision can be taken without a ruling from the Committee. In spite of this, the first disaster ever to befall the Peshawar Vale Hunt since its inception in 1870 came about when the hounds, who had only missed one season's hunting since the sixties, were destroyed. This action was taken on his own initiative by a retiring British officer due to return to England. It may be added that retribution was swift, for he injured his own foot in the process; but the loss of the pack paralysed

the Hunt. There was not enough money in the bank to import a new pack, the conservative estimate for which would have been around twelve thousand rupees, although there had been plenty to carry on the old one. Again the C.-in-C. made an appeal, to which there was an instant and magnificent response.

The result was that Mrs. Diamond, sometime Master of the Hunt, nobly came to the rescue and chose hounds for the Peshawar Vale in November. This was an unfortunate time of year to have to make up a pack, for by then all the English hunts had decided what hounds they wanted and there were none to spare. Lord Yarborough, however, Master of the Brocklesby, very generously presented a couple, drafts were also obtained on generous terms from the Cotswold and the Isle of Wight. In all seven and a half couple were imported in November, the hounds travelling out in state by B.O.A.C. plane and all arriving in good condition.

The country that has been hunted throughout the year consists of some four hundred square miles lying north and east of Peshawar Cantonment. The nature of the terrain varies from the dry wasteland, toad-speckled with olive scrub, that borders the Frontier hills, through the fertile meadows of the Vale, and gradually merges into the sandhills beyond which lie the intricate network of *nullahs* and stony foothills of the Kohat Range and the great Khajouri Plain. That part of the country lying between the Swat River and the Kabul has been eloquently described in the Hunt records of 1870, and the writer affirms that "the far-famed shires of the Eusafzai Valley have long been acknowledged to be the only real hunting country in India".

Hunting conditions in Pakistan differ enormously from those appertaining at home, not only in the nature of the country, but in the peculiar problems arising out of it. Instead of the small woods and copses, most of the hunt coverts consist of reed beds, and the Master must spend long days in July and August going round these coverts arranging for renting in a temperature often hovering round one hundred and sixteen in the shade. The dried-up winter beds of the streams have become swirling angry torrents swollen with the melting snows from the hills. Cubbing begins in mid-October, when the banks of the dykes and streams are almost covered with a thick forest of high grass and weeds.



A handsome old Khan examines a pistol in the rifle factory at Darrah



Women wearing burqas *outside Kobat Zenana Hospital*

Coupled with this are bogs deeper than the proverbial Irish ones, and horses must be able to negotiate these doubles or grids, which are composed of two or more watercourses running parallel to each other between grass banks. By the end of November the trees are turning pink, bronze and yellow, only the siris and the pipal still retaining their green. The sugar-cane has lost its emerald and is ripening fast, while the distant mountains are powdered like sugar-loaves with the first snows. Then come severe frosts, followed in January and February by fogs and rains, and the rivers are running deep and fast. By April the sweet, heady perfume of orange blossom fills the air, peach and apricot trees enchant the eye, and with the ripening crops the season closes.

Apart from the Hunt coverts, only a few of the larger bogs carry enough reeds to attract the jackal that takes the place of the fox. A fast-going dog jack may hope for safety in an earth on the river banks, or he may make straight for the hills. After he leaves covert, he will cunningly run concealed on the far side of a bank or the bottom of a dry water-channel, so that there is no view when hounds are at fault. In the best part of the Nagoman, says Captain Hurst, a strong wind gets up after nine-thirty and only a steady pack can hope to hold the line and not waste time. By the time cubbing begins, the jack is really fully grown, hounds have just returned from their summer kennels in the hills and do not start really fit and hard. To the end of December the quarry is in the sugar cane, which makes incredibly heavy going for hounds, as anyone knows from bitter experience if he has ploughed his way through tough, shoulder-high cane in search of a mallard he has brought down from the edge of the *khet*.

After the cane is harvested, the jack moves to the Hunt coverts and by mid-March he is lying out in crops of barley and wheat. The average wild jack measures about thirty inches from the tip of the nose to tag of brush, and weighs around twenty to thirty pounds. He is greatly addicted to the juice of the sugar cane, doing immense damage to the *khets*, although he is partial also to berries, frogs and mice. I have seen him later slinking through the *jheels* and bogs at dusk, hanging around waiting for teal, duck or snipe left by a shooting party.

I accepted with delight the offer of a mount from the Army,

in order that I might swell the ranks, at least of those who would be properly dressed, but that last effort was nearly my undoing.

On the great day, having wakened, as always on these occasions, dry-throated and excited, with a slightly sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and disinclined for food (for until I am released into the abandon of the first run I am invariably beset with fearful visions of insurmountable obstacles and a mount I shall be unable to hold), I gazed lovingly at my black boots, polished the previous evening by a bearer until they shone, and rashly congratulated myself for having brought them. The moment came to put them on, and Cinderella's Ugly Sisters were never more desperate. I pushed and shoved impatiently. I possessed no boot-hook and a piece of string thrust through the loops had no effect. Then I panicked. I rolled on my back on the bed, my legs in the air, hoping vainly somehow to reduce their size. Nothing would force these wretched boots over my calves. A limp and perspiring wreck, I glanced at my watch. Heavens, there was no time left. Almost weeping with mortification, which was no doubt most salutary for my vainglorious soul, I was forced to abandon the attempt and turn out in simple jodhpurs.

We had been instructed to call for Major-General Haji Iftikhar Ahmad at five-thirty a.m., and presently, preceded majestically by his staff car with pennant flying, we set off for the Grass Farm on the outskirts of Peshawar, where the Meet was going to take place. On the way we passed herds of stiff-legged goats in charge of small and ragged boys, off to snatch what they could from the surrounding vegetation. At a corner of a quiet street a man was having his chest, armpits and legs shaved, for most Muslims are meticulous about this ceremony. I still have in my possession, carefully laid away in a box beside an ivory surama slide, a home-made pair of silver tweezers, used in a village by an old woman who, the younger ones told me, was an expert in their use. Personally, I cannot imagine anything more painful. Men were solemnly and unconcernedly wandering off the road into the middle of a field bearing a *loti*, a small brass vessel shaped like a teapot, for as yet few of the poorer houses are equipped with modern sanitation. The blue haze of early morning hung like a pale cloud over the valley, and the pungent smell of dung cooking-fires floated in at the car windows from an encampment of *kezhdai*,

the goat-hair or Cawnpore cotton tents of Powindahs, or Kuchi as they are known in Peshawar, on the last stage of their trek back to Afghanistan for the summer.

As we drew nearer the rendezvous, it became increasingly obvious that there were going to be many more than our envisaged dozen or so, and to my joy and amazement there must have been between forty and fifty people. There were Pathans on stocky, country-bred ponies, alternately standing on their hind legs, prancing round in small circles, or passaging wild-eyed down the centre of the road. John Dent and the Whip, Major Umar Khan of the Royal Pakistan Armoured Corps and ex-Scinde Horse, both in traditional hunting pink, had just arrived with hounds. The Dent family, all splendid riders, chatted with their friends, controlling their mounts easily and efficiently. There were a number of intrepid Pakistani ladies in jodhpurs and *dopattas* wound firmly round them so that one wondered why they wore them at all, and numerous Army subscribers, all scuffling and trotting and walking and shouting greetings to each other. A string of camels arrived on the scene, and for five minutes horses and camels were inextricably mixed, while the hounds, unboxed, milled around happily, sterns wagging and tongues lolling.

My horse was identified and brought forward by a *syce* who assured me blandly that he was "*Bohut atcha. Bohut greeb*"—so quiet as to be practically decrepit. I eyed him doubtfully as I tightened the girths; he seemed very large and strong and I was to realize too late that he was a "goer" with a mouth like iron. However, I took on the position of liaison officer between Ronnie and the Master, who in turn directed the field. We organized pictures of hounds arriving, and marshalled the whole field down the road about three-quarters of a mile in order to photograph them *en route*, so to speak. I had, with great tact, to try to persuade the members not to shoo off the picturesque onlookers, and tried to explain that they provided local colour, the whole object of the exercise. I trotted back and forth and sidled carefully up to stolid groups of Pathans standing rigidly to attention with their eyes riveted on the camera, trying to engage them in light conversation or break them up into groups.

The whole scene brought vividly back into mind the delightful

description of hunt photography in Somerville and Ross's *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.*

> Only those who have participated in "Hunt Groups" [it reads] can realize the combined tediousness and tension of the moments that followed. To keep thirty hounds headed for the camera, to ensure that your horse has not closed its eyes and hung its head in a doze of boredom, to preserve for yourself that alert and workmanlike aspect that becomes a sportsman, and then, when these things have been achieved and maintained for what feels like a month, to see the tripod move in spider strides to a fresh position and know that it all has to be begun over again.

Although we were not afflicted with a tripod and velvet hood, our problem was a thousand times more complex, for we were endeavouring to simulate the natural sequence of an actual meet. I dashed from one to another: "Relax. Talk to each other," I hissed. "Group yourselves, please," I pleaded. "Don't stand in a row." Dodging the local *khans*, beaming all over and plunging happily and wildly in every direction while keeping a weather eye on the whereabouts of the camera, I cantered back to Ronnie. "How do they look now?" "Get them to look as though they were in full cry," was the reply. I held a hurried consultation with the Master, the Whip and the General, who was supporting the whole manœuvre gallantly.

"All those who don't canter, please stand aside," called John. This extraordinary request was accepted without the least loss of face, and with my mouth open I watched at least twenty cautious members disengage themselves discreetly from the field. The whole scene was taking place on the edge of a natural flat plain, so we set off into the distance, those of us who cantered, while Ronnie took up a strategic position where he could shoot us coming towards him.

At the first "Gone away!" John Dent, Major Umar Kahn and hounds streaked off across the plain, the rest of the field, suddenly released into action, followed in wild abandon. The Pathans with recklessness entered into the excitement with no thought of restraining their mounts. My "quiet" bay took the bit between his teeth and thundered off in hot pursuit. There was nothing I could do but keep his nose on the tail of some unfortunate animal

directly in front of me, hope for the best, and pray that the pair of us would somehow be preserved from ruining the picture.

On our second attempt we succeeded in stampeding some cattle, and the field took on the appearance of a Wild West rodeo mixed up in a nightmarish fashion with the Charge of the Light Brigade followed by the hordes of Ghengis Khan. Flying *lungis* streamed like plumes from gold-embroidered *kulas*. Some of the subscribers indeed wore the conventional breeches, but most were romantically clad in voluminous white *shalwar*, riding madly, leathers long, reins held high and loose in one hand, while round us cavorted and rocketed the terrified steers, tails erect and nostrils dilated.



Chapter 11

KOHAT

OUT from Peshawar on the road that runs to Kohat and Bannu gaily-painted buses run, the driving compartment festooned with paper flowers, a fox's brush flying like a pennant from the radiator. The official Government buses still refuse to travel through Tribal Territory at night, and at dusk the gates at the Spin Thana or post of the Frontier Police are strictly closed.

One of the foremost steps to be taken in the light of the new policy adopted towards the tribesmen at Partition was the complete withdrawal of all military forces which for years had been posted strategically along the Frontier. While these forces had been an undeniable necessity as a security measure for the preservation of the peace of the country, the Government felt that they had outlived their usefulness in this respect. Not only were they immobilizing a large part of the standing Army, but the very presence of such a restricting force acted more and more as a source of irritation and provocation to the tribesmen, rather than as a deterrent. The entire responsibility therefore of maintaining law and order in these areas was placed in the hands of the tribesmen themselves, and the posts were handed over to be staffed in future by tribal recruits or *khassadars*.

At the time of the British the road over which I was now passing was proclaimed *sirkari*, or Government-controlled land, on which the laws of British India applied. On either side the road remained in the volatile and uncertain hands of the tribesmen, their houses and villages each with its high watchtower commanding a view of the valley, just as they do to-day. During British occupation, however, each family cunningly dug a narrow

communication trench extending from their gates to the road boundary. Thus a tribesman could reach the road under cover, and then stand up in full view under protection of the British Raj. Many a yarn has been handed down of men being shot in some tribal vendetta well off the *sirkari* and of their bodies being subsequently carefully placed on the road during the night in order that the full and righteous weight of Governmental authority might descend upon the transgressor.

In the middle of this belt of territory lies the Rifle Factory at Darrah, one of the "cottage industries" of the Frontier, and the home of my old friend Darya Khan, Lord of the River. Although deprived some years ago of one eye as the result of an accident, into which I have prudently refrained from enquiring, but which undoubtedly gives him a somewhat villainous appearance, Darya Khan would gladly have laid down his life for me, and his home, his property, which amounted to little for he was extremely poor, were mine. He could, I imagine, be ruthless enough should the simple and logical tribal laws by which he lived be violated, but like all Pathans he was quixotically generous in friendship, and to this day treasures a crumpled photograph of me, attired most unsuitably in evening dress, nailed to the mud wall beside his favourite rifle. As a result of the Government's new régime, I had often been able to explore the surrounding villages accompanied by one of Darya Khan's numerous relations, twirling inconsequentially between his fingers a neat little revolver, more out of force of habit than anything else, and using it elegantly to emphasize some point in his discourse.

As soon as a boy is big enough to hold a gun and fire a shot, he carries a rifle. As well try to part a Pathan from his rifle as deprive him of part of his dress; and at Darrah a constant supply of these indispensable weapons is turned out with incredible ingenuity and skill. I used to watch Darya Khan's many brothers, cousins and nephews at work. Small boys squatted on the floor of a tiny compound, whittling away at the shaping of a barrel with a file wrapped in emery paper, the vice sunk in the mud floor; or turning rude drills with a wagon-tyre flywheel. In spite of what seem primitive and haphazard methods, the result, which I have so often handled, is a complete replica of a British Service rifle, even down to the markings.

After Darrah, we swooped upwards again to the Spin Thana and the gates at the other end leading to the Kohat Pass, the road clinging to the mountainside like a child to its mother's skirts, while the scree tumbled down the sheer slopes to the valley below. We stopped to talk to the armed levies, but they were a new batch since I had been there last, and there was no longer green tea and a *chelum* waiting on the little square patch of ground at the top of the path up to the fort. I was in European dress, a curious *mem-sahib*, and not the old Farida Bano that they had welcomed as one of themselves. Returning can never be quite the same.

The truck in which I was travelling, thanks again to the kindness of friends in the R.P.A.F., was giving trouble. All the previous day there had persisted a peculiar knocking noise, curiously suggestive to me of a big end. However, so long as the thing runs, such minor details are blithely disregarded by the drivers. Only when a vehicle actually refuses to move do they investigate the cause, and are hurt and astonished to find that the damage has been done. We were wheezing down one of the steepest gradients, the noise growing more and more insistent, when the driver decided to stop. We slid forward a yard or two and I closed my eyes, but the end was not yet, for we did succeed in pulling in to the edge. The driver clambered out, banged away half-heartedly with a spanner in a way that was far from reassuring and we crawled on. Finally, the officer in charge, to my great relief, decided to abandon ship. On inspection, it was found that the bolts of the rear wheel had sheered off, all but one. Looking down at the valley below, I felt indeed a trifle sick at the thought of what might well have been our fate, and sank down thankfully on the dusty roadside.

Soon a couple of lorries roared up the Pass towards us, packed with Frontier Police on their way off to a patrol. We hailed them and begged a lift, leaving the wretched driver to make his way back as best he could. The men, mostly tribesmen, great hulking Pathans in grey *mahzri shalwar* and rakishly tilted berets, were delighted with the diversion, and room was made for me between two of them on the front seat. I aired some of my sketchy Pushtu and they chatted away like children, beamed on me for the rest of the journey and fed me on amroot, a kind of fruit about the size of an apple and full of soft pips. Although there are other things I

like better, I munched away nobly, hoping it would not bring on a bout of dysentery, for to refuse would have seemed the height of ingratitude.

There was no time to stop at Mir Buz's little tea-shop on the way out to the airfield, where I had whiled away so many hours, but I got a quick glimpse of him squatting on his little shelf in front of the rows of hanging cups and teapots, busily lifting lids and stirring away, the great pan of buffalo milk simmering on the stove, while a small boy deftly kneaded *chapattis* by his side. On the opposite side of the street still flapped the same old board with its gruesome skeleton, drawn rather shakily, but life-size, in white on a black ground, announcing the qualifications of Dr. Din, who guaranteed to cure all ills, a list specifying these in intimate detail and large letters closely attached.

At the entrance to R.P.A.F. Headquarters my luggage was transferred to a *tonga*, and, perched precariously on its back seat, I jogged off towards the little village of Bahadur Kot, three or four miles outside the city. On the way my driver regaled me with the story of a fight the night before in the next village of Bunda Jellabad, where two men had been killed with knives. We swayed and tilted over the narrow bridge leading up to the village, and an encampment of Ghilzais on their way north gazed up as we passed, the women busy collecting fodder for the camels. Outside the house of my old friend Talib Khan a huge Kabuli dog barked furiously, sending shivers down my spine, but fortunately it was securely tethered. An old woman looked up curiously from her cooking as she squatted, elbows on her knees, her hands flung back loosely from her wrists in characteristic pose, inexpressibly graceful. It was broad daylight, so the great wooden doors were unbolted; had it been night, we should have had to batter on them for at least twenty minutes before Talib Khan appeared, rifle on his shoulder, peering through the crack cautiously. Nothing ever happened to justify his caution, and I used to sleep soundly and serenely under the stars in the compound, a goat or so nibbling my *razai* from time to time, in a position which would doubtless have been the first objective of any marauders. They never came, and if a few rifle shots were exchanged in the silence of the night I never inquired too closely into the cause or effect the next morning.

Now Talib Khan came bustling out, followed by his elder brother Ashlif Ali, who wears to this day, grandly hanging from an ancient watch-chain tucked into his waistcoat pocket, two medals which I had bequeathed to him in lieu of the money he would never accept. One was an imposing affair won by my uncle for golf in Rangoon, and the other a silver medal I had once won at the North of Scotland Music Festival, suitably inscribed and garlanded with a laurel wreath.

They gave me a touching welcome, *charpoys* were dragged into the shade beside the stream running through the compound, a little table covered with a lace cloth, crocheted by the women, groaned under plates of dried fruit and nuts, and little Ferido staggered shyly back and forth fetching and carrying. Still busy talking, Talib Khan seized the cockerel which was to provide our dinner, and, holding it casually under one arm with complete disregard of its frantic squawking, sharpened a knife on a convenient stone and calmly proceeded to cut its throat. From the tiny windows looking out on the outer courtyard, women watched, chattering and giggling. Shortly I was taken to pay my respects and sat in miserable state while they fanned me vigorously and commented no doubt with the utmost frankness on my appearance. My Pushtu was totally inadequate to a prolonged conversation, but my few words of Urdu were translated by Ashlif Ali's wife, resplendent in bright green satin *qamiz*, her eyes black with *surama*, nails and lips stained pink. I was shown with pride Talib Khan's latest invention, a home-made *punkah*, or fan, hidden away in a dark cool little room with a stream running through its centre. The water turns a small wheel, controlling a long pole to which is attached a heavy piece of cloth. Its only disadvantage is that it is much too large in proportion to the available space, and although we sit close to the walls, should we inadvertently lean forward we must duck hurriedly to avoid disaster. I was given a room to myself, tiny, narrow and dark and entirely filled with two *charpoys* and several gaily-painted chests, where I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion with the effort of trying to conduct a conversation, for there was no end to their questions.

Next day we set off for the Kohat Zenana Hospital, where I wanted to get some more nursing experience. Permission had to be obtained from the Chief Surgeon, and with my friends who

had accompanied me to explain the whole situation I waited in the tiny office while across the courtyard an operation was in progress. Conditions were much more primitive then than they are now, and we sat dripping with perspiration for what seemed hours. Now and again a white-coated attendant came out and chatted to his friends squatting on the veranda and disappeared inside again. Chalked up on the blackboard outside the theatre are the morning's operations: "1 Gall Bladder, 1 Anal Fistula." At last there was a definite stirring inside and a small, plump man in gold-rimmed pince-nez, his surgeon's cap giving him the air of an ancient, benevolent gnome, emerged, rubber apron and all, rubbing his hands together with glee. He was followed by an attendant proudly bearing, like the crown jewels themselves, a large enamelled basin. Coming into the office with the air of a man who has achieved a lifelong ambition, and paying no attention to us whatsoever, he carefully watched his acolyte, who planked the basin down on his desk. All eyes were riveted to its contents. Suddenly he whisked round and fixed us with a fanatical eye.

"Would you like to see this gall-bladder?"

We murmured with what we hoped would be appropriate delight in anticipation of this unexpected treat. With the triumphant air of a conjuror, the little man dabbled his hands in the dark-coloured water, and in the twinkling of an eye produced two stones about the size of large marbles lately in the unfortunate patient's possession. There were "Ohs" and "Ahs" of delight, feigned or otherwise. We complimented him warmly, and his little eyes fairly beamed with delight. The stones were washed and carefully placed on his desk. Did he intend them for an anatomical museum, or would he fondly bequeath them to his grandchildren to play marbles with? It was all so fantastically unreal, but we flattered ourselves that our poise remained unshaken. It is certainly something of note to be faced with a gall-bladder of such distinction in the middle of a Monday morning. I have to record, alas, however, that its late owner did not live long to enjoy his undoubted notoriety.

After all this excitement had died down, we were presented to the doctor and I was given the desired permission to undergo my apprenticeship in the Zenana Hospital next morning. It was, as its name signifies, entirely for women, and complete with a female

staff, as, of course, the old *purdah* system debars a woman from any male medical attention, even in cases of life and death. I have been told by one of their own medical men of more than one agonizing occasion when, the patient concealed behind a screen, he has had to convey instructions for the conduct of a case according to the reports given to him by a half-trained local *dhai*, or midwife. One young man of my acquaintance, a qualified doctor, told me of the dreadful straits in which he found himself during his wife's first confinement, which proved to be difficult and dangerous. "You see, there was nothing I could do," he said. "Being a man, the women would not let me into the room." He finally had to send a couple of hundred miles for an elderly Englishwoman who practised in the next province.

To the hospital came women from the city itself, from the surrounding villages, Tribal Territory, and from the little bands of passing Kabuli *log* or Ghilzais. Once inside its walls, *burqas* were thrown back or dispensed with altogether. Pathan women are traditionally good-looking, but some of these girls possessed an almost legendary loveliness. There was one in particular who might have been her of whom the Pushtu poet Khushal Khan Khattack wrote in the seventeenth century:

> Your cheeks are like a leaping flame,
> And your tresses seem
> The smoke that rises from the fire.
>
> Since you have closed on me the doors
> Of meeting, my constant tears
> Have made new paths into my heart.
>
> The lashes' arrow she has pulled on the bow
> Of eyebrows: what heart will bleed?
> Death within death is the black collyrium in black eyes.

To Dr. Elizabeth Williams will go my eternal gratitude for all she did to afford me as much experience as was possible during my stay. It was difficult to persuade women to have their babies in hospital unless they were *in extremis*, which threw added burdens of complications on the already overworked staff. Often we wrestled together in the small labour theatre to save a child I never imagined could be born alive. Instruments were sterilized

outside on tiny wood fires. The heat was always intense, there were no fans, but nothing damped the ardour of these nurses, and Dr. Williams worked quite unsparingly day and night under conditions which would have overwhelmed anyone of weaker fibre. I shall never forget my first delivery, or of hanging grimly on to Dr. Williams lest she slip on the floor, awash with blood and water. It was a case of contracted pelvis and necessitated a high forceps delivery. I had no conception that such traction could be applied and the child emerge unscathed. As soon as the baby was born it was handed over to me, and then began the frantic and seemingly endless fight to transform the limp and tiny object into life. A daily occurrence in our hospitals in this country, under the conditions pertaining in the East it assumes the nature of a miracle. The cold and hot water, the breathing into the tiny mouth, the injections, and suddenly the scarcely perceptible whimper, the little choking noises, and then the breathlessly-awaited wail that betokens life. And, with tears pouring unashamedly down my face to mingle with the sweat, I would carry the little brown body off to bath and dress and finally lay beside its mother.

When I finally left to prepare for my journey to Dera Ismail Khan, tears and blessings fell indiscriminately, and I was moved to present my precious hot-water bottle, carefully preserved against the coming winter, to the Maternity Ward, which was received with a delight far surmounting its worth, so that I almost felt it should have been suitably inscribed.

I ate every evening by special arrangement at the Kauser Restaurant, which was rather like an unofficial club. The same people came night after night, nearly all personal friends of the young proprietors. There were continual greetings in Pushtu, embraces and shouted orders. We all drank vast quantities of tart green *sabbas chae*, or Kabuli tea, out of shallow, handleless cups. A group of tall, swaggering Pathans from Tribal Territory strode in, stacked their rifles—made, no doubt, in Darrah—and sat down to *chapattis* or *nan*, *kebab* and meat *pulao*. Mohammad Hussain, majordomo and cook as well as my own particular guide, philosopher and friend, hurried back and forth, towel over his shoulder, producing gaudily-coloured and sickeningly sweet

cakes and pastries from the fly-spotted glass cupboard leaning drunkenly in one corner, and live fighting quail from the top drawer of an ancient bureau, which held also to my certain knowledge napkins, *barbosas* and tobacco.

I casually mentioned that I was leaving for Dera Ismail Khan next day, when Murid Yunas said why didn't I make a detour and go by Paniala. It appeared he had a friend there and, he added, his eyes twinkling, "You can go on from Pezu by camel." That settled it. Where was Paniala? Somebody produced a pencil and drew a map on the back of an envelope. A couple of young men from the Officers' Training Camp outside Kohat came over and joined us. Mohammad Hussain brought a fresh brew of tea, sent a small boy out for more tobacco, and squatted beside the table advising, gesticulating and enthusing.

He had a face like a prince out of *The Thousand and One Nights*, at once fierce and sensitive, with features chiselled to the bone, mobile and expressive, wild dark eyes ringed with surama, and the hands of an artist. He could with facile ease turn out a *crêpe Suzette* worthy of a *cordon bleu*, play with incomparable rhythm an *élan sitar*, fiddle or *tubla*, and sing for hours the songs of his province. He it was who showed me how to wear my *dopatta*, or head-veil, how to pleat it Pathan fashion, a custom dying out now except in the villages, told me where I should get the best material for my *shalwar*, and sent me to a reliable tailor. From him I had my first lessons in Urdu. Night after night I sat, Mohammad Hussain patiently saying the words, and shaking his head fiercely every time I stumbled over the pronunciation. I felt like a student taking lessons from a *prima donna*. . . . So, we will have that trill again. . . . I would watch breathlessly his hands, his mouth, his eyes, until he more or less hypnotized me into repeating them correctly. Then he would lean back and sigh happily, "*Shabash, Begum Sahib*" (Well done).

He had just taken unto himself a second wife, his first having recently died. Sakina was a child of fifteen or so who, he said deprecatingly, preferred to play with her dolls. He brought her to tea one day, a tiny creature in a smart, modern brown silk *burqa*. She was no doubt overcome with shyness, for she scarcely spoke a word and giggled all the time.

Outside it was quite dark with the jewelled, velvet darkness of

the East. Across from the café one of the city gates opened into the bazaar, its narrow streets blazing with naphtha flares, throwing ragged jostling shadows among the crowds. The noise floated out, a jangled medley of shrill voices against a background *obbligato* of *sitar* and *tubla*, the staccato clanging of *tonga* bells and the "*Battcha! Battcha!*" of the drivers. The air was laden with the sharp odour of spices, the acrid smell from dung fires and the heady, haunting fragrance of jasmine.

In the main street, the lighted shops were dispersed in little islands of orange-yellow, the flames from a momentarily uncovered cooking fire suddenly lighting up a bearded face, long and lean, like an El Greco Christ, sparkling on a gold *kulah* or the delicate silver *serak* of a *chelum*. *Tonga* lights appeared in the distance like faint eyes, and tiny candles sputtered in the niches of a *ziarat*, or shrine, amidst a gaunt, uneven forest of sticks pushed into the ground, bits of coloured cloth fluttering from their tops like ragged leaves.



Chapter 12

JOURNEY TO PANIALA

AND so next day, accompanied by the faithful Khuda Buksh, elated at the thought of seeing his family again, especially in such auspicious company, I willy-nilly caught the early bus from the city, feeling a trifle self-conscious and conspicuous in the enormous garlands hung round my neck by my friends of the café, who had come down to see me off. There was an incredible jumble and clamour at the bus station. The vehicle itself was crudely painted in bright colours, the inside a tangle of dusty paper flowers, and the inevitable fox's brush on the radiator. It always seems something of a paradox that in a country where the people are so inherently fatalistic, shrugging their shoulders in the face of death, illness or disaster, "*Kismet*" (it is the will of Allah), that such stress should be laid on symbols and charms. Every child will have a *taviz* hung on a cord round its neck, bought perhaps at a price its parents can ill afford from a *pir sahib*, or holy man. This may consist of a few words from the Quran, written on a scrap of paper by the *pir*, among the poorer members of society sewn up in a piece of rag, or among the rich encased in a silver amulet sometimes almost as big as a cigarette case. There are charms for all ills, whether of the flesh or the spirit.

Time slipped by, and it seemed that never would all the passengers be collected. It is apparently an unwritten law that no bus ever leaves without its full complement of passengers, so that delay must be accepted as part of the business. There are always so many last cups of green tea and a final puff at the *chelum*, or, as they say colloquially in Peshawar and Kohat, *chelum-melum*. They use this strange duplication of sound effect

much as the Aberdonian uses the double diminutive, *khana*, food, becomes *khana-mana*, and so on. There are long and lingering embraces between Pathan friends, for it is quite a common sight to see a couple of bearded Pathans walking along hand in hand. The driver sounds his horn from time to time as a matter of course, but little attention is paid to it. Somehow we are all packed inside at last, the women in their *burqas* segregated in the back seat. After endless hooting and shouting, the driver succeeds in extricating us from a *mêlée* of excited *tonga* ponies, bleating goats and laden donkeys. By a miracle we avoid a couple of scornful-looking camels and at last rattle off through the city gates.

From Kohat to Bannu we churned up the dust, weaving and swaying through rocky defiles and great boulder-strewn escarpments where once the bullets whistled through the pass and hooves thundered to a cavalry charge. The whole Frontier is alive with tales of blood feud and ambush, love and lawlessness, and as far back as Graeco-Bactrian times the dwellers on the banks of the Indus set up posts to keep the hill tribes from their sheep and fields.

We hugged the narrow, metalled centre of the road, sending men rushing wildly to the heads of oxen and bullocks, blankets flying like wings from their shoulders as they strained at the cumbersome carts to push and shove them out of our path. Driving at night, these slow-moving vehicles become a positive menace, as the drivers simply go to sleep on top of their loads and the bullocks wander along the middle of the road with no lights to indicate their presence. The story goes of some gay young officers out on a spree who turned several of these carts the other way round without waking the drivers. In the morning the poor men found themselves back where they came from, which was doubtless a hard but salutary lesson. Lines of camels strung nose to tail were suddenly plunged into mad confusion at our approach, and laden donkeys scrambled up the banks, their hooves spattering up white dust and tiny stones like bullets.

At Bannu we changed buses. The second bus, having already stood in the sun for several hours, was even hotter than the first, so that we struggled from one inferno to another. I ate a great many loquat, small pear-shaped fruit like apricots growing in

clusters, and somehow endured it till we moved on, although the wind coming in at the open window seemed to be blown from some colossal electric drier and was rough to the touch. The road became wilder and wilder. I was again the only woman in front of the bus and the only one unveiled. The others still huddled in the back, white, shapeless bundles, with here and there a slim, hennaed hand shyly parting the scalloped edge of a *burqa* or clutching a tiny baby, its eyes carefully outlined with black, and often, if it were a boy, wearing an incredible little hat, presenting an oddly grotesque, top-heavy appearance, the vivid, red, gold and blue embroidery sitting quaintly above the tiny face.

Sometimes we passed an encampment of Ghilzais, their flat, black tents pegged out low on the ground. The women squatted over smouldering dung fires, kneading *chapattis* or carried loads of fodder on their heads, walking with long, swinging strides. The poetry of their movements has a wild, barbaric grace, and their glances hold all the shy fierceness of a wild thing. Further on, merchants and camel men (*ushwal*) had pitched their encampment on the plains, and on the road we passed strings of *charra log*, meaning unencumbered, who have come down from Afghanistan without their families to work as labourers or hawkers. Sometimes the men leave their women and female camels in camp and trek off to the cities, where they do a great trade as moneylenders, their fierce appearance no doubt putting the fear of death and worse into the hearts of their creditors.

The bus stopped at a tiny village and an Afridi got in carrying a cage of quails, which at once attracted Khuda Buksh's attention. The cage was made of netting in the shape of a cone, drawn in at the top, with bright cyclamen bobbles of wool gaily dangling from the circular cardboard base. He assured me that his birds were good fighters, and took one out, which he played back and forth on the palm of his hand with a continuous flick of the wrist, a habitual gesture, which is supposed to inculcate in the bird the movements of attack and retreat. I had a long conversation with an old *khan*, very dashing with a bright red hennaed beard. The use of henna is widespread all over the Frontier and Pakistan generally. On the advice of the Prophet himself, one of the four things a believer should do is to "bind" henna, the others being to clean the teeth, to take a wife and to use perfume. He told me of

his son who is now a *khassadar* and has been selected for special training at Miranshah, where he will also learn to read. He was most vehement against the notorious "Faqir of Ipi", who, he said, was a thorough *badmash*, and commented that he was only able to enlist some of the worst and most hot-headed characters to fight for him by paying huge bribes, raised, or so he said, by subversive elements outside the country. He himself once belonged to the famous Tochi Scouts and still wore a belt with a revolver, carrying himself with great dignity.

By evening we reached Pezu, a dry, flat, camel-coloured village, and thankfully sank down on our *charpoys* in the *dâk* bungalow, or rest-house, which was cool as a cathedral after the intense heat of the day. Little brown frogs hopped away as I stepped into my tin tub. Later the Police *Tanadar* came across from the station with one of his men, and we arranged for camels in the morning. We all sat outside after supper on a raised platform—a *chabootra* —with a framework above, originally designed to support an awning, and discussed at great length the wearing of the *burqa*, about which they were adamant. "But a man will have no *izzat* if his wife goes round with her face uncovered for all to see." I argued as far as politeness would allow, but there are two words on the Frontier about which there can be virtually no argument. The one is *izzat* and the other *sharm* . . . respect and shame. And so to bed, where a couple of pi-dogs elected to spend the night outside on my veranda, squatting on their haunches and baying at the moon, the answering jackals slinking round the perimeter of the compound and making sleep almost impossible.

At four o'clock in the morning a curl of blue smoke spiralled upwards from the back of the *dâk* bungalow. Hurricane lanterns fled to and fro, flowering like pale yellow ghosts in the lightening dark. The stillness was rippled every now and then by the hoarse laughing cry of a jackal. Inside, the flittering bats swung from the rafters in a last frenzied parabola of flight. Hurriedly we drank down the thick, sweet tea and rolled up our bedding.

Outside in the compound the camels crouched, great unfamiliar shapes, blurred and sphinx-like in the half-light, their vast bulk hung around with all our possessions. Awkwardly I clambered aboard; two or three terrifying see-saw movements to which I can never become fully accustomed, and the huge beasts rose to

their feet. As my saddle was simply improvised from a few carpets and rugs carelessly strapped across the wooden framework, I had perforce to sit sideways, and felt utterly helpless and insecure, poised at such a height. Finally, after several abortive starts in various directions and much persuasion accompanied by a string of guttural imprecations in Pushtu, relating to the ancestry of all camels, from the Pathan camel-driver, our little caravan stalked majestically out of the courtyard and into the morning.

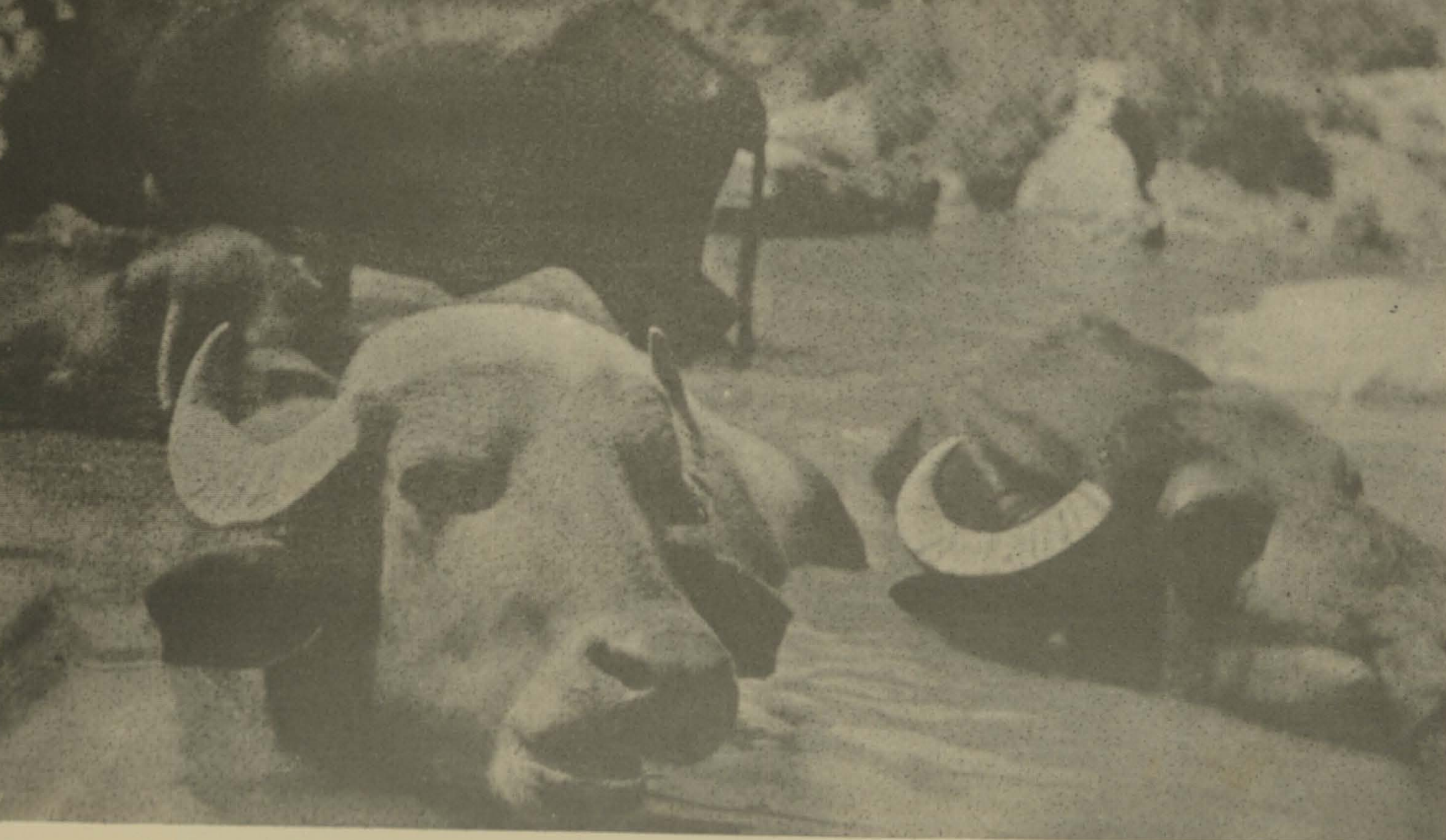
The sky was still night blue, a pale white moon throwing long shadows across the road and etching the cold silver scrub with black, the dark tracery of the twisted trees like some forgotten, ruined landscape. Far away ahead was the gap in the hills that led to Paniala. Soon we turned off the road and struck a tiny camel track scrawled uncertainly across the desert. The timeless beauty and imagery of the scene, repeated God knows how many times down the years in the cool of an Eastern dawn, caught at my heart. In this moment, poised between night and day, with all space a crowding together of illimitable centuries, there was no present, only "a soundless landscape resting under a cloudless destiny".

Slowly the stars paled and the sky gave way to a suffusion of delicate saffron, streaked with the shot silk of the faint, spreading pinkness that was the dawn. Too soon the landscape shed its mysterious night beauty for a flat, dry uniform whiteness, tufted with low cactus and camel thorn. We threaded our way ponderously through rolling dunes and mounds of grey boulders, to the soft pad of splayed hooves and the metallic tinkle of our bells. Round a corner we came suddenly upon the body of a small donkey lying by the side of the track, pathetic matchstick legs thrust stiffly upwards in the grotesque, unlovely attitude of death. At our approach the kites rose clumsily, gorged and heavy, obscene shapes, their huge wings and scraggy necks out-thrust in flight, only to circle above and land again once we had passed out of range.

Now and then we passed little groups of tribesmen, great, virile fellows for the most part in wide, baggy *shalwar*, rifles slung over their shoulders and bandoliers across their embroidered waistcoats. Midday and the heat descended from every quarter, wrapping us round like a blanket. Impossible to describe the white hot atmosphere, trembling and shimmering in the intense sunlight,



Doing my best to appear calm and confident . . .



Buffalo wallowing in a floodea watercourse

or to convey an adequate impression of a mirage, conjured up out of the barren wilderness. One can only relate it to the realm of fantasy, that vast sheet of water in whose cool depths the reflections of the surrounding trees plunged and rippled as if swayed by some gentle breeze. Skirting the hillside, we swung out in a long curve to join the road again, while the mirage slowly narrowed and suddenly shattered into nothingness.

About four in the afternoon we came within sight of the little town of Paniala, its lush tropical vegetation cresting the hilltop, and the blue, white and gold of the minarets of its mosque rising in delicate columns above the clustered houses tumbling down the narrow streets. The camels broke into a long, smooth trot. On the outskirts, herds of goats grazed wherever a green thing sprouted, their long ears hanging like great mottled leaves. Curious, shy-eyed children gazed at us as we passed, lovely faces flowering in breath-taking beauty beneath ragged veils, slim olive hands clutching a bundle of firewood or balancing a clay water *chatti* on a head with practised ease. The dates that grow here in such profusion are said to have sprung from the debris of a Greek camp as Alexander and his men pushed southwards along the Indus Valley.

We splashed eagerly through a shallow muddy stream and then climbed steeply upwards between narrow, walled houses to the home of Mohammed Akbar Khan of Paniala. Never shall I forget the hospitality of these people or the warmth of their welcome. We dismounted stiff with weariness and were plied with fresh, cool water from a deep well in the compound, tiny juicy apples of unremembered sweetness, bunches of velvety loquat, tea in flowery red-and-gold Russian teapots, and hard-boiled eggs in unbelievable quantities. Cushions were brought from the house and piled behind us on the *charpoys*. A small boy darted off to return with a *barbosa*, with which an old man insisted on fanning me.

The first pangs of hunger were assuaged by the time that Mohammed Akbar himself arrived. He appeared round the corner of the compound in true Oriental style, riding a lovely half-bred Arab mare, her foal trotting at her heels. Greetings over, in no time at all we were transferred to the guest-house. Great tin tubs were dragged forth and filled with water from the

deep well in the courtyard, steaming *chattis* of hot water were ranged in rows beside them, a *charpoy* was made up with fresh embroidered sheets; soap and towels appeared as if by magic. Small boys prepared *chelums* as they are accustomed to do for their elders, although it is strictly forbidden for the young to smoke in the presence of grown-ups, while others took it in turns to pull the enormous punkah hung from the ceiling in the centre of the room. Having finally, with much difficulty and only by the exercise of the maximum of tact, disembarrassed myself of the band of helpers, I settled down to the task of bathing and changing and trying to get rid of the white dust that covered me from head to foot.

I was no sooner dressed than more tea was produced and the Mullah arrived with a request for me to visit the sick in the village. Paniala had formerly quite a reasonable hospital, but recently it had to be closed owing to a subsidence of the ground, which had undermined its foundations. There was no medical aid nearer than Dera Ismail Khan, some forty miles away. Scarcely anyone ever troubled to make the journey, although the condition of many I saw was extreme. They were so grateful for the little help that I could give, hampered as I was by lack of time, drugs and equipment. As I passed along the narrow lanes with my guide, women ran out, begging me to come in, men hurried home to fetch a sick child. Everyone expected me to take tea or *lhassi* or sherbet, and it was impossible to refuse without the risk of mortally offending them. Now Paniala has been put on the map and along with other Frontier villages enjoys a tap-water supply and regular medical aid.

I finally visited the zenana of the Khan himself. He came with me and we sat and talked for a long time of conditions in the village. He begged me to come and set up a dispensary; he was prepared to spend any amount of money, but alas, it was almost impossible to get anyone to work there. Just before I left his wife disappeared to return a few moments later with a selection of three or four lovely *dopattas*, from which she indicated I should take my choice. The giving of a *dopatta* is regarded as a mark of respect, and the exchanging of *dopattas* is a pledge that you will remain as sisters for ever.

That night produced the culminating moment in my journey.

After a meal of truly gargantuan proportions, chicken *pulao*, *dhal*, *nan*, exquisite brilliantly-coloured chutneys, *firni*, a white milky pudding covered over with the thinnest leaves of pure beaten silver, and the inevitable green tea, musicians were summoned to entertain me on the roof-top. Normally women are debarred from attending these functions and can only glimpse them from the windows of the zenana if they are lucky. *Charpoys* were arranged on the flat roof of the guest-house, lit by a couple of hurricane lanterns. It was like a stage-set in the midst of a great amphitheatre of mountains, with lightning playing round the circling hills like a backcloth. A lovely emerald praying mantis added a final exotic touch to the scene, settling on the table under one of the lanterns, its fragile beauty moving like some strange transparent underwater plant.

Then into the stillness of the night poured the melody of harmonium, *sitar* and *tubla*, wild Pushtu songs, their rhythm growing wilder and more abandoned as the musicians lost themselves in the passion of their music. Into the circle of light swayed a slim, almond-eyed boy, with anklets of silver bells, and a *dopatta* half covering the carefully made-up oval of his face. Well into the night I listened and watched, spellbound, caught up in an inexplicable emotional unity with these rough and often uncouth, hard-bitten Pathans, whose hard life contrasts vividly with the way in which they give themselves over to their music, pouring out in song and story their innermost, inherited claims to the beautiful in a transmutation of living into a saga of tremendous power and fire.

Long after they had gone back to their homes I lay under the stars for a ceiling, and the air still seemed strung with that music, leaving my memory dancing over and over with its tempo and my soul haunted for ever by that unforgettable scene.



Chapter 13

DERA ISMAIL KHAN

KHUDA BUKSH'S father owned a group of three two-roomed houses outside Dera Ismail Khan, each within a high-walled compound, but communicating one with the other. The compound was entered through a small wooden door let into the wall and leading straight into a room set apart for male visitors, where they were either entertained or waited quietly smoking their hookah until the women had all vanished into their own quarters, for strict *purdah* was observed and no woman was to be seen without a *burqa* draping her from head to foot. Great double wooden doors, a mass of intricate carving almost Byzantine in design and wealth of detail, led into the main rooms.

We received an affectionate welcome from his mother and father, a rather shy one from his wife, self-effacing, as she should be, and a vociferous one from his small brothers and sisters, who crowded round me with flattering if embarrassing concentration. The little girls already had their noses and ears pierced, waxed thread or a bit of wire thrust through the hole in preparation for the jewellery, into the purchase of which the men put all their savings. His mother's ears were pierced all round the outer lobe and hung with silver rings, whose combined weight had pulled them forward, giving her a peculiar, elfin appearance.

The whole compound was scrupulously clean, with its tiny sunken garden where the hard green limes would ripen, its line of glistening cooking pots strung out to dry in the sun, and tree-rats like pretty little squirrels darting up and down the trunks, peering through the leaves with bright, beady, inquisitive eyes, always wary for the sudden swoop of a hunting kite. In one corner the

family had built a little shower; enclosed by a rather rickety hut, it certainly helped to solve the washing problem. The other bathroom amenities, however, were not so evident, and merely consisted of a single wall built out about four feet from one corner of the garden, the "convenience" a heap of dried leaves. Again the torture for me, not only of doors that would not lock, but of no doors at all.

A baby lay in a square cradle rather like a child's swing, hanging from the branch of a tree. It belonged to the second wife of Karim Buksh, Khuda Buksh's elder brother. She was a coy, plump, rather pretty girl, fully conscious of her superior position over his first wife, Zora Bibi, childless and therefore neglected and treated rather as a poor relation. Zora Bibi was a thin, humble girl, whose small breasts scarcely lifted the folds of her *qamiz*. Like a faint reproach, she sat a little apart, watching Zakia preening herself, careless and happy. Like Lorca's Yerma, her great brown eyes yearn and call to the moon, to the fruitful sun:

> Oh what a meadow of anguish!
> Oh what a door closed to loveliness!
> I want to bear the pain of a child, and the air
> Offers me dahlias of the sleeping moon.

I have seen Malookah, Khuda Buksh's young wife, watching her. She too is as yet barren, and all the time in her mind is the same thought: that he too will take another wife; and I think of Nowsha Bibi, the gardener's daughter in Pir Sabak, and am glad that at least she is far enough away to be out of the running.

In one corner an ox and a donkey circled endlessly, trampling out the wheat, while Malookah and her mother-in-law, their heads bound tight in their *dopattas*, held high the shallow raffia baskets, and the golden dust spiralled down in great whorls of ever-changing patterns. They showed me how they made a kind of *pasta*, pressing it through small holes in a wooden frame and then draping it in long strands over the sides of a *charpoy* and drying it in the sun. They make a sweet pudding with it, rather like vermicelli.

To one of these houses came every year the same family of Powindahs from Afghanistan, tall men, well over six feet, and

shy, lovely women with fine patrician features, the folds of their wide skirts giving them a statuesque, plastic beauty. Durkhana Bano was the matriarch of the tribe, with a straight, tall carriage and the figure of a young girl. Sitting talking one day, she suddenly ripped open the front of her dress to show me how lightly the years and a family of sons had dealt with her body; light gold and firm it was, with breasts like small pears and a belly hard and muscular like a dancer's. She obviously expected me to do the same and was determined to know what I wore underneath my *qamiz*. The brassière she had seen drying in the sun intrigued her beyond words, but she was surprised that a soft-living creature like myself could have survived the birth of so many children and still merit her approval.

She danced for me the Kabuli dances, reminding me so vividly of our own Scottish ones that I cried out, "Oh, but my people dance like that!" and to her unending joy, carried away by my own enthusiasm, I expounded to the best of my ability the intricacies of the eightsome reel, the sword dance and the highland fling, until I collapsed breathless and perspiring to be revived with green tea and, as a special treat, goat's milk ten months old. She never tired of extolling the beauty of her native land, her eyes flashing, her swift hands gesturing out of the wide sleeves as she talked of its mountains, its fruits, rushing streams and tall trees. She had the soul of a poet, and would break off every now and then and croon, "Khorassan! Ah, Khorassan!"

There was great excitement when I was there, as her eldest son, Ghul Shah, was about to set off for Afghanistan for his wedding. He was taking with him a camel caravan laden with tea and a dowry amounting to five thousand Afghani rupees for his bride. On the evening of his departure he was stricken by fever and I was called in to minister to him. He stood there awkward and docile, and as I stood on tiptoe holding his wrist and trying vainly to peer down his throat, I could not help a secret smile at the strangeness of the situation. Here was a man, fierce, ruthless and cunning, with a reputation for almost every crime in the calendar, meekly sticking out his tongue and saying "Ah" as harmless in the sanctity of our relationship as a small child. A few days later his caravan was ambushed by Mahsuds and attacked, but he escaped with his life.

Every year half a million Powindah tribesmen of Afghanistan come to Pakistan, of which the greater number are Ghilzais of the Suleiman Khel, the Ali Khel, Aka Khel and others. Pastoral Powindahs collect in the same place every year on a date and time determined by a *jirga*. The *maliks* or patriarchal chiefs wield little influence, for, as the Powindahs say, "We are content with discord; we are content with blood; but we will never be content with a master."

Durkhana Bano, like all the other married women of the tribe, wore her hair braided, each plait no thicker than her little finger and stiffened with sugar diluted with water. The unmarried girls wore long dresses over their trousers tight at the ankle, without a yoke, and their hair in a fringe at the front and plaited at the back. As much material as ten yards is used in the wide skirt.

When a girl reaches maturity, her near female relatives are summoned and the mother distributes sweets among them, saying, "*Lur me khawzah shwa*" (my daughter has become sweet). The girls marry about the age of sixteen to twenty and the men at about twenty to twenty-five. A suitable bride is selected by the mother of the young man with the father's consent, and a *jirga* headed by the *sayed*, or chief, approaches the father of the girl. These are called the *rahbar*, or go-betweens. If the father agrees, he then gives a white handkerchief and needles and thread to the youth's father as a sign of agreement. This is called the *hokra* ceremony, from *ho*, meaning "Yes," and *khara*, "doing". At this meeting the day of the betrothal is fixed after a long argument, for the girl's father does his best to delay the matter in case people might think that he was trying to get rid of his daughter with indecent haste. Then twenty to thirty men, relations of the youth, go to the tent of the bride's father with the price of the bride (*walwar*), and the date of the marriage is settled. The dowry is paid partly on the day of betrothal as a kind of mark of good intent, and partly on the wedding day, and consists of cash and sheep, goats or camels.

After the first betrothal ceremony has taken place, the future bridegroom is free to visit his future wife at her father's tent and spend the night with her. This is known as *chal Chaghal Bazi*, ostensibly without the knowledge of the father, but with the

connivance of the mother. If the girl should become pregnant, then the second day is fixed earlier. The final ceremony is carried out by the *mullah* at the bride's house or tent and then the bride, mounted on a camel decorated with shells, bobbles of wool and gold, goes off with her husband, and on the third day the relations go and take presents.

One day Malookah asked me if I would go with her to visit some friends in the city, and was delighted that I should say, "Yes," excited as a child to be able to show me off. The day arrived and at the appointed hour we were all ready to set off, myself in my best *qamiz* and *dopatta*, gold-embroidered *chaplis*, or sandals, on my feet, when Ghulam Haider, looking up from his *chelum*, gasped out in horror:

"But you're not taking Farida Bano out like that? It would not be proper—two women and one of them without a *burqa*. *Toba! Toba!*"

"But, Ghulam Haider, I have been cycling all round Dera Ismail Khan like this, and I travelled all the way from Kohat too!"

He was adamant. As long as I was under his roof—or, rather, within his compound—I belonged to his household, and while not exactly one of his women, I approached nearly enough to that category to come under his direct protection, and the fact that we were going out as two women alone was enough to violate his sense of respectability, for he and those like him still consider *purdah* not only as the hall-mark of gentility, but a vital necessity.

There was nothing for it but to obey or mortally offend the old gentleman. Malookah and her mother ran off looking for a *burqa* for me and finally brought one which unfortunately had been designed for a much smaller head than mine, with the result that it would not fit in the right places, and when I looked through the crocheted eyepiece I had to bend half over before I could see the ground. I moaned and wailed to no avail, and off we went. The agonies I endured were infinite, I stubbed my toes, bare in my *chaplis*, against enormous boulders, I nearly got run over by a bicycle. However, out of sight of the house and with no man in view, Malookah boldly threw back her *burqa* and I followed suit. As soon as we saw one of the male sex approaching down came the heavy folds. It was amusing walking along unseen and inviolate, watching the eyes of the passers-by, rather like wearing

sun-glasses or a veil at home. Somehow one is lent a feeling of invisibility, and I can even understand some of the attraction it holds. I remembered a story in one of the local papers about a man following a woman. She turned up an alley and led him through a maze of narrow streets, but he caught up with her, after she had led him a pretty dance. He begged her in low tones to lift her *burqa*—that he was mad for love of her and had watched her walk and knew she was young and pretty. She did so with some show of reluctance, and to his horror—it was his wife!

The modern *burqa* can be most seductive. It is made in two pieces, the first like a long coat buttoning all down the front from neck to hem. Over this is a headpiece, tied round the head and falling like a cape on the shoulders. This can be thrown back leaving the face uncovered but framed in flowing drapery like a nun, very lovely if the *burqa* is made of rich purple, blue or dark brown. Even the young girls coming to art classes at the University arrived in *burqas*.

It was dark long before we were allowed to leave, and Khuda Buksh and his brother had come for us on their bicycles. They had no lamps and we sat on the carriers, a precarious and uncomfortable business, for there is nothing quite so erratic as a Pakistani on a bicycle. I abandoned my *burqa* and carried it back rolled up in a bundle, but Malookah still clung to hers, although, safe in the company of her husband, she threw back the face-piece. On the outskirts of the town an enormous Kabuli dog suddenly rushed at us. We swerved violently, I shouted "*Curra!*" which had the desired effect, and with Khuda Buksh breathlessly gasping "*Shabash, Begum sahib!*" (well done!), we righted ourselves and arrived back in safety.

Next day was the start of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. In spite of the fact that the women would gladly have cooked for me and understood had I not kept the fast, I could not bring myself to eat in solitary state, and rashly announced my intention of also observing Roza, as it is called on the Frontier. It is one thing, however, to abstain from food and quite another to go without water. No smoking is allowed, or indeed any enjoyments of the flesh, and most of the day is spent sleeping. We were wakened up at two o'clock in the morning, and ate breakfast while the stars paled and from beyond the Indus the

dawn flung long streamers of colour into the sky, suffusing it with emerald, lilac and a saffron. By the time that we had finished the shadowed walls had cast their softness and rose up white and blinding in the morning light.

I was still suffering from a prolonged attack of dysentery, which had persisted in spite of swallowing literally pounds of kaolin, and Khuda Buksh, taking pity on my sufferings, would creep along to my room, a kettle of tea hidden in a basket, which I regret to say we wickedly shared. His mother insisted that I tie round my middle a *tawiz* wrapped up in a very grubby bit of red rag, but it was Khuda Buksh who finally solved the problem and put an end to my misery. He came back from the bazaar one day grinning with pleasure and bearing a small packet of what looked rather like birdseed. This was stirred into hot milk, the resulting mixture was thick and gluey and the little seeds had swelled to a state horribly reminiscent of frog-spawn. However sceptical I felt, there was nothing else to do but take my medicine, which quite frankly acted like a charm, and cost, as Khuda Buksh never tired of pointing out, only four annas.

By six or seven in the evening preparations were begun for the meal that would break the fast. Smoke drifted up through the compound from the low cooking-fires, and the noise of *chappati* being slapped from hand to hand, before cooking them on what closely resembled a Scottish girdle. Fresh water had been brought and stood in the great *chattis*, ready for the first drink. The smell of sizzling *kebab* and hot *pulao* filled the air. Then from the mosque the voice of the *mullah* called "*Al-la'a . . . ho . . . Akbar . . . r . . . r, Al-la'a . . . ho Akbar . . . Ash . . . hado . . . o . . . an . . . la'a . . . ila'a . . . ha'a . . . il . . . all'ah . . . ash . . . hado an na Mohommedan Rasel ullah. . . .*"

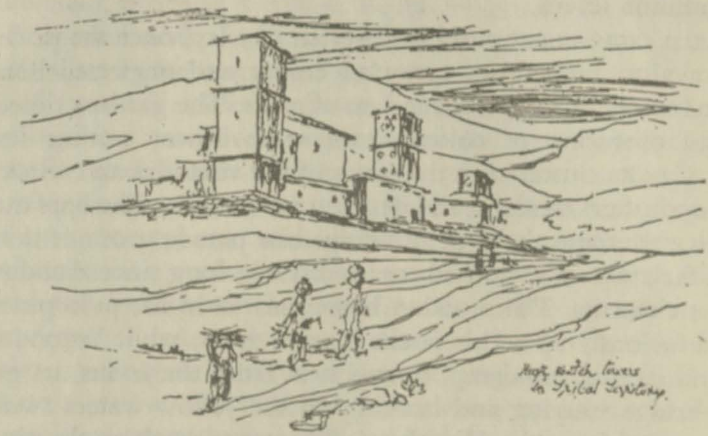
One morning we set out to see the city. Part of our way led through street after street of empty, abandoned houses with a tilting fretwork of balcony and veranda in faded greens and pinks and blues, Hindu and Sikh, with here and there a blank space or a heap of rubble like a bombed site. Amazed, I turned to Khuda Buksh and his brother. They shrugged their shoulders, "*Pahle Hindu makkham, Begum Sahib*" (they used to be Hindu houses). It was like a city of the dead, with only scavenging pi-dogs, and

their rivals the kites drifting slowly above, wheeling in slow circles like autumn leaves.

In the cantonment another deserted city lay, once the pride of the cavalry; bungalows sprawled empty and neglected behind barbed-wire entanglements in lieu of gates. The gardens rioted in a wild profusion of colour from some flower seeding itself. Wasps' nests clustered in the eaves of the verandas and windows gaped, shutters creaking and flapping mournfully. The lines themselves were mere shells of buildings, the parade grounds dotted with skeletons of armoured cars and trucks long since abandoned to the elements. The wooden horse once used for polo practice stood forlornly up to his hocks in rank grass, while beyond and around filtered the damp, humid heat from the Indus, its great boat-bridge swaying and heaving on the yellow waters swollen with snows from the Himalayas. We turned back to the city in silence, I for one deeply moved and saddened beyond words at the inescapable evidence of the price of freedom.

My last night fell, the thick, jewelled, velvet night of the East. I lay on my hard rope *charpoy*, gazing up at the slender crescent of eggshell moon, whose coming had marked the end of Ramadan and the feast of Id. Little gusts of talk came and went like the rustle of leaves in the wind. Cocoon-like shapes topped the double line of *charpoys* in front of me, all facing towards the Holy City. Yasin turned in his sleep and called out. His mother bent over him with a murmured "*Bismillah*" as she tucked him in. The whole family slept outside, for it was cooler there and there was less likelihood of being tormented by mosquitoes, although I myself was badly bitten. The jackals set up their unearthly howling, interspersed with the barking of village watchdogs. Underneath and around me were the crushed, starry petals of the *chambeli* flowers that Malookah had strewn on the embroidered bedspread to delight me with their sweet, heady perfume.

As I pulled the padded *rozai* further round my shoulders I sent up a silent prayer that the simplicity and naïve happiness of this place could remain, and that the brave new world taking shape all round me might spare one corner of the old.



Chapter 14

SAMLI

Two days later I was back in Peshawar, standing in tense expectancy on an airstrip on the outskirts of the city. It had been arranged through the kind co-operation of Group Captain Raza, who is probably quite unaware that he has been responsible for one of the thrills of my lifetime, that in connection with a feature on the Royal Pakistan Air Force Ronnie should go up in a Harvard two-seater and photograph three Furies flying in formation against a background of the Khyber Hills. It was a perfect day with just enough cloud to make a good picture, and everyone was most carefully briefed in the crew-room.

Listening to all this, a little demon inside me suddenly whispered: "How can you possibly write about this if you haven't flown in one of the planes yourself?" Could I get permission, and could I ask to do aerobatics? I approached the C.O. of the Fighter Squadron. He looked doubtful. Raza was the only person who could give the official order, and he was just about to leave for Lahore. "Quick. Ask him, then," I gasped. Chaudry smiled and went off. After what seemed hours he came back—thumbs up! One of their best pilots, "Lucky" Hyat Khan, arranged that he

should fly both Ronnie and me, and I promised to be ready on the airstrip as soon as he landed, after the photography part of the exercise was over, so that he need not stop the engine. I saw Ronnie off and waited impatiently, watching those tiny specks up in the sky; one was Ronnie hanging around waiting for the Furies to take up position.

Wandering nervously back to the crew-room, I chanced on a little pamphlet written by Ian Stephens on his experience of aerobatics. Idly I turned the pages. I began to read. Apparently Mr. Stephens had experienced a number of strange and not always pleasant sensations. A doctor had come into the crew-room on his descent just to check up in a friendly way. I began to wonder if this time I had overdone my avidity for experience. I had no time to think any more, for all of a sudden the aeroplane came circling in to land and a young pilot was calling; "Miss Elizabeth. Please come now." Somebody handed me a helmet and I raced out, my heart beating like a sledge-hammer.

Standing shivering beside the vibrating Harvard, I saw to my consternation a very green and shaken Ronnie emerge from the cockpit. Apparently all had gone well until Lucky as a special treat had gone into a barrel roll. That had finished it as far as Ronnie was concerned. I smiled wanly and climbed in, feeling a trifle odd, but doing my best to appear light-hearted and confident. There were so many straps I knew I should never remember which to pull if I had to bale out. Over my shoulders, my knees, the parachute harness; then the helmet; there was inter-com., which was reassuring. It was all over in a second. We taxied off and were suddenly airborne.

For the first moment or two I was inclined to cling to my seat. This bore no relation to the solid, drawing-room atmosphere of a large passenger plane. It felt almost as though I were sitting in mid-air, strapped to a small chair, with nothing to support me at all. It was like being a bird. It was flying as I had never realized it could be. A tremendous sense of excitement and mad joy took possession of me. I wanted to shout, to sing. It was the same sensation I knew sailing in heavy seas, up in the bows or leaning on the tiller alive under my hand, insanely one with the elements. My voice through the inter-com. must have sounded choked. We climbed round and took a look at Peshawar below us. The shires

of the Yusafzai Plain and the great bowl of the Peshawar Vale rolled away in a dream landscape beneath us. The Harvard rose still higher and the Khyber Hills sheered off to our right, and below lay Peshawar City in a huddle of buildings, the narrow streets in uneven, untidy lines, like the scribblings on a child's slate.

"All right? Enjoying yourself?"

Flicking back the little knob at my ear, "It's heaven," I replied.

"Right then. We'll do a barrel roll for you. First we have to climb to about four thousand feet and then we'll go into a slow dive."

Lucky's voice had the soothing, bedside manner of a doctor with a nervous patient. This is it, I thought. We climbed steadily, took a dive, rolled gently over, and there I was with the heavens at my feet and Peshawar City above my head. "How are you?" called Lucky.

"Just fine," I answered breathlessly. A slight pressure on my shoulders and we seemed to drag ourselves out of it and straighten out.

"Another one?"

"Rather!" And then obviously relaxing and deciding I could take it, we did it again. Then we looped the loop in one glorious, smooth, scenic-railway swoop. The sensation of the air rushing up to meet us, the universe, or so it seemed, whirling about us as we sang through the upper air, was wildly exhilarating and to a novice like myself magically intoxicating. We zoomed downwards and skimmed the Kabul River, peering at the women washing and pounding clothes on the flat stones of its banks. We flew low over Peshawar City, the bazaars wriggling lanes of bobbing turbans, and we rose clean and swift again and glimpsed once more the eternal snows of the Himalayas. At last we came in and taxied to a standstill on the airstrip. The pilots made a fuss of me and I found myself something of an eccentric, if not a heroine, and bored all my friends for weeks talking about it.

From Peshawar I set out for Samli, by way of Rawalpindi, where I was to act as Staff Nurse for a month at Samli Sanatorium. The road runs out through the lower foothills between gentle slopes covered with the grey-green of olive trees, gradually

rising and growing wilder as the olives give way to giant pines, their great cones strewn on the ground like fantastic brown pineapples. A jackal slunk across our path and monkeys chattered and screamed in the tree-tops.

Leopards, too, frequent the higher slopes, and occasionally, becoming too bold and making off with a goat or two, have to be hunted down and shot. On one of my rare week-ends in the hills, staying in a tiny *dâk* bungalow with nothing between me and the outer air but a thin door of mosquito netting, I was kept awake all night by a mysterious intermittent coughing which annoyed me exceedingly. I called out to the *chaukidar* either to be quiet or go away. Tossing and turning, I toyed with the idea of handing out a sedative, and in the morning filled with professional zeal, was about to recommend that the poor man be examined in hospital (tuberculosis being uppermost in my thoughts at the time) when he came hurrying in to drag me forth and point out with excitement and not a little unease the pug marks of a sizeable leopard, which, he averred, had been prowling round all night outside my sleeping quarters.

The road to Samli climbed in a long series of hairpin bends, doubling back on itself like a narrow white shelf cut into the mountains. Far below, the slopes running sheer down to the floor of the valley were terraced in minute green strips, the houses built on tiny platforms of carefully-levelled soil. On their flat, grass-covered roofs children played and goats and calves browsed unconcernedly. Around the house an uneven two- or three-foot ledge juts out like a parapet before the ground plunges away in a fall of several hundred feet. From the veranda of the bungalow that was to be my home for a month I could have dropped a stone through the tops of the swaying pines, the swish of their branches like the sound of waves on a pebbly beach.

Coming back at night from Murree, whither we of the staff scrambled on our half-day to drink tea and gorge ourselves on sweet cakes at "Sam's", with the stars above and the tiny lights twinkling in the bowl of the valley, a blue mist drawn like a veil between, was like flying on a magic carpet through illimitable space, and amply rewarded us for the crowded, smelly bus and the fact that we had as always spent far more than we could afford out of our slender salaries.

The dirty, squalid little village outside the gates of the sanatorium housed an overflow of patients sprawled on miserable *charpoys*, lying endlessly and hopelessly on the low verandas, watching the fat, purring cars on their way to Murree, the nearest hill station for families who could afford to send their women and children to the coolness of the hills for summer, and the relatives of patients already admitted toiling up in the rickety buses, laden with bedding, cooking pots and baskets of food.

The bungalow, originally intended for one, I shared with two other girls. Amna was a Pathan, whose people belonged to the mountains of Tirah, beyond Peshawar. She had defied convention by leaving her husband and her two young children in the care of her mother and coming to Samli to train as a nurse. She had been married at sixteen, and on her wedding night had calmly gone off to her room as usual. Shocked and horrified when her husband marched in ready to claim his bride, she pushed him out, locked the door, and demanded next day an explanation of this violation of her privacy. It was weeks before her mother, her mother-in-law and her entire family could prevail on her to undertake her marital obligations.

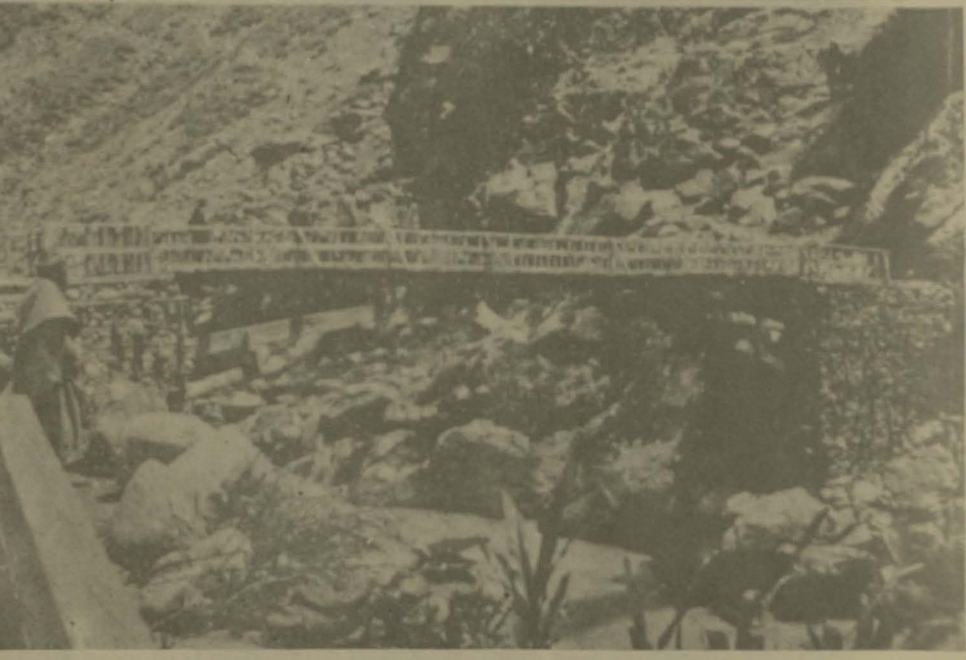
The other occupant was a Sikh girl who had become a Christian, extremely serious and totally devoid of the least sense of humour. Although I was exceedingly fond of her, she had a most trying habit of shattering the peace of the early morning, just as I was drinking my first cup of tea, by spending ten concentrated minutes gargling and spitting on the edge of the veranda. Before this performance signalled the beginning of the day's work, I crept furtively round on tiptoe, for on one side of me Amna intoned verses from the illuminated Quran she kept carefully wrapped up when not in use in an embroidered bag on her mantelshelf, while on the other Miss Lal painstakingly read the Collect for the day. I often thought they must have considered me something of a heathen, for my own communications with the Almighty invariably took place during the watches of the night, privately in the sanctity of my own room.

While my new abode was a definite improvement on Pir Sabak, there was as yet no electricity or running water. I slept at first with my doors wide open for the sake of air, but after a few unpleasant nocturnal visitors in the shape of huge and hungry pi-dogs I



Books on heads, children go to school in Saidu Sherif





(Above) *The Shahi Masjid at Saidu Sherif.* (Below) *A narrow wooden bridge over the rushing waters of the Swat River at Bahrein*

gave up the struggle. Waking one night with a start to realize that something was in the room, for I heard heavy breathing and soft movements, I lashed out with my hunting crop, which I kept rather guiltily on the end of my bed. Which of us was the more startled I have no idea, but the pi was out of the door in a flash. Another evening, trying to write some letters by the light of a dim and flickering oil-lamp, which attracted to its yellow halo the largest flying beetles it has ever been my misfortune to encounter, a voice murmured in my ear, and there at my elbow was a villainous-looking beggar grinning and holding out his hand. Curtains I had none, and I was hard put to it to cover up my doors and windows in the morning while performing my modest toilet in the tiny tin basin which was all that the room provided in the way of a bath.

When the rains came, everything movable hurtled down the hillside—rocks, earth, and even bits of the wards. Water cascaded down the rocky paths like miniature waterfalls. Thunder crashed and echoed in the mountains, and ricocheted off the plunging cliffs like a physical blow. When the first drops fell I had perforce to drop everything and dash wildly back to the bungalow to move all my furniture to the other side of the room, for quite half of my roof leaked like a sieve; and one day I arrived on duty to find one of the wards completely under water, which poured in at the back door and washed merrily out at the front.

Pi-dogs were not the only peculiar creatures to be encountered in the night, as I discovered to my horror. One night, half undressed after a final round of the wards, my eye fell casually on my fireplace, up which was crawling slowly and laboriously an enormous spider with a fat, hairy body about the size of a penny. Gritting my teeth, I dispatched it with the heel of my shoe and crept into bed, feeling slightly sick. No sooner had I settled down for the night than a piercing shriek came from the room delegated to Miss Lal. "Miss Farida! . . . Miss Farida!" Snatching up my torch and wondering nervously what new horror awaited me, I rushed to the rescue, to find a stiff and petrified Miss Lal sitting bolt upright in bed clutching the bedclothes modestly about her, while a large scorpion skated back and forth on top of her bedside table, between the Book of Common Prayer and a half-eaten piece of *halva*. This also fell to my bag, but it was a trophy

I could very well have done without; and although the scorpion was carrying half a dozen babies on her back I ruthlessly exterminated the entire family. While admiring the maternal instinct, it seemed to be stretching it too far to extend it to scorpions.

In the evenings we sat and talked or exchanged visits with the rest of the staff. On these festive occasions I wore *gharara*, the wide, graceful trousers with deep gathered frills falling from just below the knee and looking almost like evening dress. The girls constantly deploring my meagre proportions, considering me much too thin for beauty, and I retaliated by pointing out that both Amna, aged twenty-two, and Miss Lal, a mere twenty, looked as though they were in the advanced stages of an interesting condition. Although practically old enough to be their mother, I left them simply standing when it came to climbing up and down the rocky paths to the wards, and was constantly pursued by moans of breathless anguish and calls to wait for them. Half in fun, I suggested violent physical jerks, and demonstrated the measures necessary to reduce their ample girth. They took all this very seriously, and for the remainder of my stay, instead of religious exercises, two panting and groaning maidens could be seen each morning patiently plodding along behind each other on the veranda, solemnly picking up pebbles without bending their knees. "One, two, three . . ." puffed Miss Lal. "*Yau, dwa, dre, salor* . . ." echoed Amna in Pushtu.

I had charge of the women's side of the hospital, consisting of about thirty patients. A round of the wards carrying a heavy tray of medicines meant a climb up and down of several hundred feet, a perilous undertaking in the dead of night. One of the first things I had to do was to learn to count beyond a hundred in Urdu, for the patients took their own temperatures, and in the morning I had to make the rounds and fill in the last four readings. The accuracy of this system left, I feel sure, much to be desired. To add to the chaos an itinerant pedlar with his performing monkeys was greeted with naïve delight and dragged from ward to ward until everyone had seen the show.

There was one young Pathan girl to whom I became especially attached. One night she had a severe hæmoptysis, and after that we all knew it was only a matter of days. She was moved down to a small room away from the ward, and there her mother and

father, husband and brothers came to wail and pray. I spent every spare moment with her, for it never occurred to them to bathe her damp brow or sponge the thin, fevered wrists. She couldn't swallow, and the one fear she whispered to me constantly was that her soul would not be able to escape from her body. She was firmly convinced that the soul was a tangible object, ready to leave her body when she died. If nothing could pass down her throat, how then could her soul get out? No argument could shake her childlike logic. She died on the day of the Governor's visit, the hospital gay with bunting, huge *shamianas* flapping over a sumptuous tea. I had been with her all day long when I was sent for to shake hands with Sirdar Rab Nishtar and have my photograph taken along with the rest of the staff. I still remember very little of the actual ceremony, for all I could think of was the soul of Zora Bibi and the fact that there would be no one there to hold her hand. As soon as I had obediently shaken the hand of the exalted one I rudely rushed off, but in those few minutes she had gone. Within a hour or so a *charpoy* covered with a gaily-embroidered sheet was bearing away the tiny body that scarcely showed underneath.

The rest of the afternoon's proceedings were enlivened by a near riot as the result of an unfortunate remark by one of the speakers which cast aspersions, or so the locals contended, of a most uncomplimentary character on the hospitality and generosity of the neighbouring *khans*. An old man with a magnificent flaming red beard, his baggy trousers starched stiff as paper and a gold *kulah* glistening in the sun, leapt on to the platform like a nimble goat, and, seizing the microphone, harangued the guests. Men rose from tea tables and strode purposefully through the throng. All tactful efforts by the Superintendent and the platform party failed to part the old gentleman from the "mike", to which he obstinately clung with one skinny hand, waving the other wildly in the air. Finally, I gathered that they had persuaded him that his honour had been vindicated, and gently but firmly propelled him back to his tea table, where doubtless the famous panacea of "a nice cup of tea" soothed his savage breast. Disaster had been averted, but for the rest of the afternoon there was a muffled undercurrent of unrest, and small groups of men, the hospital they had come to see forgotten, gesticulated fiercely,

quoting the Quran and the Prophet, with frequent pious but ironic "Peace be upon him" in support of their arguments.

The rules of *purdah* are evidently less stringently observed in sanatoria, for the three doctors were all male. Nevertheless, the discussion of symptoms often involved a complicated process whereby the patient told the nurse and the nurse retailed the story to the doctor. Most of the patients were young and belonged to the more enlightened classes, who are slowly but surely casting off the obsolete customs of their forebears. In spite of this, the moment a patient was called upon to leave the ward, out came the *burqa*. There was one toothless and wizened grandmother, too weak to walk (she had to be borne in a wheel-chair), who, when summoned to the X-ray unit, invariably refused to budge until she was securely buttoned into her brown silk tent, and the head-piece drawn carefully over the long-vanished beauty it was intended to conceal.

Tucked away up in the mountains fringing the North-West Frontier Province are several tiny states, which, although opting for Pakistan at Partition, still preserve much of their old independence, and so when a brief note from David caught up with me just before my departure from Samli, asking whether I would like to see one of them before I left Pakistan, I hastily telegraphed, "Yes."

Formal permission was granted by the Wali, the head of the state, and we arranged to meet at Mardan.



Chapter 15

JOURNEY TO SWAT

For anyone who has ever known the Frontier, Mardan must surely be a milestone on the memory. Mardan, alive with shadows, where the moving finger has written indelibly on every stone and corner; Mardan, home of the famous Guides Cavalry, the beautiful memorial arch to the Queen's Own Corps of Guides who fell in defence of the Residency at Kabul in September, 1879, standing mirrored in the marble water tank of its peaceful garden.

> They do not give their opinion hastily, but they believe that the annals of no army and no regiment can shew a brighter record of devoted bravery than has been achieved by this small band of Guides. By their deeds they have conferred undying honour not only on the regiment to which they belong but on the whole British Army.

What finer epitaph could there possibly be than this? There is a great deal of confused thinking over the part the British played on the Frontier, of what some like to call the cruel persecution and suppression of the innocent tribesmen who have now settled down so happily under the green star and crescent. Be that as it may, up to fifty years ago and even more recently the tribesmen, natural fighters and fiercely jealous of their independence, resented any encroachment on their territory, either from foreigners or brother Muslims, such as Punjabis or Bengalis, who to this day have retained a wholesome respect for the Pathan. The building of roads and railways had to be carried on, and to the tribesmen these amenities did not appear as harbingers of liberty and civilization, but symbols of slavery and persecution. At the same

time, they grew to respect the bravery of the men who built them, for courage is valued highly on the Frontier, and a kind of sporting element in the perpetual guerrilla warfare was often apparent. If the British were forced to strong reprisals by the bombing of a village, frequently quoted by Pakistanis—although they themselves had recourse to a somewhat similar action not so very long ago—warning was sent in order that the women and children could be safely evacuated. Afterwards tribal chiefs visited Sir George Cunningham to thank him for flying over their bombed village and personally seeing that the British rules of tribal warfare had been observed.

Tales of heroism and self-sacrifice on both sides are abundant, as well as stories of the most savage cruelty of the Pathans. But, strange to say, the outcome of the whole thing has been the reverse of what most of the ardent nationalists would have us believe. There are names revered on the Frontier to-day with not the slightest tinge of resentment, and the most virulent anti-British propaganda comes from raw youths with leftist tendencies and not even a nodding acquaintance with the Frontier or the events that took place there, or unscrupulous politicians anxious to provide a scapegoat for their own errors of administration. Security measures in some areas are still as stringently enforced as ever they were, in spite of the boasts of peaceful penetration so often referred to; and, like the Black Douglas, there are yet tribes who answer to no law and whose name can still inspire, if not fear, then let us say a definite unease in visiting Pakistanis who are not Pukhtuns.

In Mardan too stands the Guides Chapel the foundation stone of which was laid in 1887. Again the sense of the past comes up alive and warm like unshed tears. There are dates on the simple stones as recent as 1935 and 1937 of men killed in Waziristan. There are the graves of Danish nurses belonging to the mission who have died on service. One small grave remains as a terrible emblem of Pathan vengeance on the one hand and Christian fortitude and self-sacrifice on the other. David told me the story as we lingered in the cool shade of the surrounding trees.

Apparently a young servant belonging to the Mission, a Christian, had aroused the love of a Pathan, who was, of course, a Muslim. The missionary flatly refused to countenance an

immediate marriage; the girl was a mere child and had been brought up in a different faith, and he urged the young man to wait. But patience in such things is not a Pathan virtue, and the Pathan took his revenge in the only way he knew. A few days later the missionary's only son, a child of six, was found brutally murdered in their own compound. It speaks volumes for the couple's belief in the value of the work that they were doing that they buried the child and remained to pursue their calling in the place to which they had been sent. Such infinite courage and sacrifice is beyond the comprehension of most of us.

Some eight miles east of Mardan, rock edicts of Asoka, the grandson of Chandragupta Mauriya who was responsible for expelling Seluceus Nicator, successor to Alexander the Great, furnish a positive proof of the proclamation of Buddhism in this part of the sub-continent. From the Indus to the Hindu Khush are scattered remains of Buddhist *stupas* and monasteries and near Mardan, perched high on the rocky hillside, rises the ancient Buddhist monastery of Takht Bhai, dating from the Gondophares period of the first century A.D. From here and all the way up and into Swat State, Buddhist remains lie in a long trail of Graeco-Bactrian carvings, like the pebbles in the old fairy tale.

The railhead ends at Dargai, and an armed *serai* marks the entrance to the Malakand Agency. Through Dargai passes all the colourful traffic from the north, from Swat, Dir and Chitral. Looking down from the narrow road climbing up into the hills, a vast panorama of valleys and plains opened out below us, the Upper Swat Canal, laid like a silver thread across the broad shires of the Yusafzai plain, stretching in an ever-diminishing pattern of tiny squares of cultivated land.

From the heart of Indus Kohistan, tumbling down through great clefts in the mountains, cascading over giant boulders, worn and polished satin smooth, and sculptured into grotesque shapes of elephant grey and slatey blue, races the milky torrent of ice-cold water that is the Swat River. Cutting deep into the sheer rock and straddled in its upper reaches by tiny bridges of unique and local pattern, the river spills into the broad plain of Malakand, carrying with it the timber cut in the mountains; then loops and coils its way through miles of emerald-green rice-fields to be stemmed and harnessed at Amandara Headworks. Released into

the Upper Swat Canal, the waters are led through the hillside by way of the Benton Tunnel, to emerge above Jabhan Power-house, where they plunge downwards two hundred and fifty feet through the penstocks to drive the five turbine alternators.

Looking down from the summit of the Malakand Pass, where the famous fort still gazes eyeless out over the Frontier hills, Jabhan looks for all the world like some shining model toy, a fantastic anachronism in the midst of these ancient and primitive hills. The engineers who constructed it, with the vision and foresight of men long accustomed to wresting beauty from those barren spots to which all their lives they have been relegated, have planted trees and flowering shrubs, *kikar*, banana, *sheesham* and pepper trees, so that what was once bare rock is now overhung with luxuriant foliage, and the air is cool and damp, with a fine cloud of spray rising from the spillway plunging down the hillside like a natural waterfall. Only a few yards away from this triumph of modern engineering lie the remains of a Buddhist *stupa*, pieces of its weatherbeaten carving strewn among the scrubby bushes where the goats browse, while above tiny picquet posts are strung like watching eyes. During the building of the power-house the local tribesmen demanded that the most recent of these picquets should be built, with an eye, of course, to the levies who would be paid to man them. The Buddhist *stupa* was discovered, incongruously enough, when they decided to level out the ground for a football pitch.

As I wandered round, fingering the flaring curve of a Grecian nostril on a fragmentary head of Buddha crumbling daily in the hot sun, I watched a battalion of Mahsuds from South Waziristan digging yet another channel along the hillside for the extension of the scheme to Dargai. The men who dig are still called *ferhad*, after the old Persian tale of Ferhad and Shireen, immortalized in Nizami's poem, "The Labours of Ferhad". One thing that always strikes me about almost any Pakistani is his innate love of poetry and music as opposed to an almost complete lack of appreciation of the visual arts. The young engineer who showed us round at Malakand eagerly related the story of the Persian lovers as naturally as his British counterpart would talk of the prospects for the Cup Final.

Like so many maidens, Shireen imposed upon her lover an

impossible task, without the accomplishment of which he could never hope to win her hand. She demanded that unless Ferhad produced water from the hillside she would never consider his suit. Ferhad, in the manner of all legendary lovers, began a heroic struggle with the hard soil of the hillside:

> The mountain trembles to the echoing sound
> Of falling rocks, that from her sides rebound. . . .
> The mist of night around her summit coils,
> But still Ferhad the lover-artist toils,
> And still the flashes of his axe between—
> He sighs to every wind, "Alas! Shireen!"

At last his patience and labours were rewarded and, love granting him the powers that nature had denied, a spring of clear water spouted from the rocks.

Roaming idly up from Dargai to Jabhan, we wanted to photograph some buffalo half submerged in a clear stream that had formed a natural basin at the side of the road. Several small girls were in charge, and though obviously awed by our presence they stood their ground bravely enough until it came to the actual photograph. Then one of them set up a howl. The others joined in, and I had visions of an irate father bounding down the hillside with his rifle at the ready. In halting Pushtu, I tried to explain that nothing would happen to them or their animals, but it was hopeless. They listened for a moment and then broke forth in renewed lamentations, no doubt firmly believing that I was about to cast a spell over the innocent buffaloes.

From Malakand the road wound along the canal, with children splashing in the water and shrieking shrill greetings as we passed. Amandara Rest-house where we broke our journey was once a fort, with a great gateway and portcullis guarding its entrance. Armed *khassadars* leapt up from their *charpoys*, where they had been enjoying an evening *chelum*, sprang hastily to attention, hurriedly buttoning tunics and adjusting headgear as we approached. They were a little out of practice, but their enthusiasm made up for the slight irregularity of their dress. The old *chaukidar* materialized as though by magic from some subterranean chamber, and extended a skinny hand, looking, we

felt, like an ingratiating vulture, and we knew that already he was calculating just how much we were worth.

The last part of the journey wound along the river bank, where here and there were great piles of sleepers and wood of all kinds had been floated down the river, and soon a wooden barrier swung open as we presented our credentials at the frontier post leading into Swat. At the modern and up-to-date state-run hotel at Saidu Sherif, Sher Khan was waiting for us. An old friend of David's, he was a Pathan from Sher Poh, a round, merry little man, full of plans for our visit and bubbling over with enthusiasm.

After dinner we sat out in the cool garden, watching the stars spring into brilliance, the air drenched with the heady perfume of "Lily of the Night", and listening to the gentle splash of water in the tiny fountain behind us. Sher Khan and Gundar Shah, the hotel Manager, sat with us, extolling the beauties of their native valley with simple delight.

"Don't you ever want to go back to the city, Sher Khan?" I asked, for he had a college education and had travelled widely.

His great black eyes creased with merriment. "We have all we need here," he replied, "as the Persian *ghazal* says, for the life which is necessary to the soul, the body and the heart, four things there be, 'a running stream, a flowered glade, a jug of wine, a lovely maid'."

"*Bismillah*" murmured Gundar Shah in fervent agreement. Although the lovely maid was not in evidence, we at least had the other three, which David pointed out with disarming candour were all he wanted at any rate.

Early next morning I climbed a little way up a nearby hill in that pale, nebulous hour before dawn, with paints, sketchbook and brushes. It would be almost impossible to convey the depth of quietude, the sense of all-pervading peace and utter isolation that brooded over that place, like a mountain-top or an island floating in mid-Atlantic. Valleys and hills lay beneath me fold upon fold, camel-coloured villages half awake, with smoke curling upwards from the houses, and the ribbed fields running down the hillside or laid like patchwork across the plains. A small boy gathering his thin hill cattle up the bare slopes for the day's grazing threw himself down behind me and watched the colour flow on to the white paper as one entranced. Slowly the sky

warmed into opalescent pink and green and the rising sun threw long shadows over the palm of the valley. The hills assumed shape and grew solid and round like a contour map. Presently Sher Khan came panting up the hillside to remind me that it was time to set off on our expedition into the interior of the state. Reluctantly I gathered up my scattered paraphernalia and scrambled down towards the hotel.

Outside the gate a long crocodile of children were already winding their way to school. There seemed to be hundreds of them, each balancing on his or her head with practised ease a native slate and a bundle of books neatly tied up in a handkerchief. Each bundle was precisely the same as the other, bobbing up and down and presenting a curious, uniform pattern of moving blocks of colour. The children first learn their alphabet on a slab of wood spread with mud, in lieu of the old-fashioned slate on which some of us painfully scrawled our squeaking A, B, C. Suddenly my mind flew back to some half-forgotten schoolday of my own, bringing back a memory of the acrid smell of newly filled inkwells, the drone of a fly on a summer afternoon, and the choking particles of chalk dancing like tiny dust motes on a bar of sunlight penetrating the musty schoolroom from the world outside. But here the schoolroom itself is often outside, and what distractions there must be! Like a frieze, inside the schoolrooms are painted such inspiring mottoes as "Honesty is the best policy", and "He who runs may read", printed in large and imposing English script. Perhaps the foreign policy in this respect was not such a bad one after all.

About two miles from Saidu Sherif stands Mingora, the state's largest business centre, the bazaar gay with the famous Swati blankets striped like a Mexican *poncho* in vivid red and white. I stopped to buy and chat with the shopkeeper and the interested crowd that gathered to proffer advice and greetings, for a purchase in the bazaar immediately becomes a matter of communal interest and speculation. Somehow it was borne in on me, surrounded by a cheerful crowd of what could at first glance only be described as riff-raff, that there was something missing. The noise, the smell; there was only one thing. I missed during the whole of that journey through Swat the thin, whining voices, the plucking hands and the bowl thrust under one's nose.

"Sher Khan," I asked, "haven't you any beggars in Swat?"

His chubby face registered extreme pain and shock. "Begging is a major crime in the state," he replied with a subtly remonstrative air, rather like a Pakistani Pooh-Bah. "There's another thing too," he went on, "that you won't find in Swat, and that's a cinema."

"Really?" I replied with what was in all probability an incredulous expression, so conditioned have we become to the presence of the acquisitions of so-called civilization.

He went on to explain patiently that the installation of cinema houses had been expressly forbidden by the Wali.

"You see," he said, "how can he be sure that the films shown would benefit the people?"

This was a cross between Utopia and Gilbert and Sullivan again, but in the face of such irrefutable argument I was silent. Why indeed should the unnatural and artificial dramas of the modern screen be introduced into this quiet backwater? While one cannot help but admire such a strict and astringent policy and admit that here at least is honesty of purpose and integrity of vision, there remains the lingering wonder as to how long the native and primitive culture will survive. Will the young men and women of Swat who go into the world come back dissatisfied with the slow and unexciting pace of rural life, and will they inevitably hanker after the fleshpots like so many of our own islanders, and find the tempo unendurable?

Our next halt was at Madian, tucked away in a crevice in the hills from which it seemed at first sight there was no means of escape. In actual fact, the old motor road previously came to an end here, and now it has been extended up the valley as far as Bahrien. All at once David spied a pipe-line shooting down the hillside. Climbing a tiny rocky path, winding above the river, feeling its way through wild holly bushes and tall pines, past groups of shaggy hill ponies being loaded with salt and *atta* for Indus Kohistan, we came upon what at first sight seemed to be some Heath Robinson contraption, constructed in the mountainside by an eccentric inventor, but which turned out to be neither more nor less than a fully-fledged hydro-electric scheme. This amazing erection had been installed by a Pathan from Mardan, Abedullah Khan, and the turbine generators along with the

electrical gear had been bought from a surplus dump. The Pelton wheels he had manufactured himself. Electricity is distributed to his customers at a rate of five annas a unit by overhead lines on wooden poles. As a sideline, this enterprising gentleman utilizes the surplus energy to drive a band saw, with which he cuts up timber, later to be converted into boxes for the export of fruit and the delicious Swat honey.

A little further on a house was being built by the side of the Swat River. This process presented a scene of incredible gaiety, with workmen carrying bricks and laying mortar to the accompaniment of an ancient *tubla*, the tempo beaten out by an aged musician sitting cross-legged on the scaffolding, the antique equivalent no doubt of "Music while You Work".

The motor road comes suddenly and abruptly to an end at Bahrien, where two foaming torrents meet, and whose main street is built literally across the rushing waters. Tiny houses are set into the hillside, only a stone's-throw from the boulders that fringe the river and almost indistinguishable from them. The women of Bahrien are famed for their beauty, and several girls, shy and lovely, if rather grubby and distinctly in need of a wash, cast curious and diffident looks in the direction of our little party, their hair cut in the straight fringe so beloved of the Powindahs, and silver ornaments shining in the folds of their black dresses.

Here we started off on the long trek up to Kalamb, accompanied by a local youth who had volunteered to carry our bedding, and two of his young brothers who had insisted on coming too. We tramped for miles up and down the narrow path, sometimes simply composed of rough steps hewn out of the rocky bed, and all the way along the foaming silk-green torrent of the Swat River crashed and echoed in our ears. Then all at once, far in the distance, rose the first snows, the white-streaked peaks of Mankial, soaring 19,000 feet into the air and swathed in an eternal veil of cloud.

Lunch over, I perched myself on a great boulder in the middle of the stream, trying to translate the beauty of the scene in terms of paint and canvas. Soon I became conscious of a movement beside me. A young woman crawled out to my eyrie and squatted down beside me, quiet and serious. Soon she was joined by a small boy and girl. None of them spoke, and I wondered whether

they had ever seen a picture before. I greeted them in Pushtu and tried to make some conversation; but they spoke a dialect of their own. Between a few words here and there to the accompaniment of smiles and signs, I learned that she had come from Indus Kohistan and was walking down to Bahrein with her family to collect a supply of salt and flour. Proudly she showed me her bangles and looked in vain for mine. I felt somehow undressed and naked in my old slacks without ornament of any kind, almost a traitor to my sex.

Soon a little crowd collected, drawn mysteriously from the bare landscape, and one of the men asked me for some medicine for his wife. I scrambled obediently back to the bank and a shy and giggling female was pushed forward by her relations. In my best Pushtu, learned at the Kohat Zenana Hospital, I asked her where the pain was. She only giggled and pulled the black *dopatta* (used for all purposes, from wiping the noses of snuffly babies to drying dishes) closer over her face. I tried again. Finally, her husband stepped forward and said in Urdu, "My wife doesn't understand English." There was little I could do, but as something was obviously expected of me I unearthed two or three aspirins from my bag and suggested that she should see the doctor in Saidu Sherif. Then they indicated that a note from the *mem-sahib* to the doctor would no doubt ensure immediate and miraculous attention. I tore a sheet from my sketchbook, and with the entire family breathing down my neck wrote what I felt to be a wholly impertinent note to the doctor at Saidu asking that my "friend" Zakia Begum might have his personal attention. They kissed my hands and rained a positive shower of blessings on my wholly undeserving head, so that I was moved to present Zakia with my scarf, which she had been fingering enviously, and they all departed joyfully.

Further up the trail we were overtaken by a cousin of Sher Khan's on his way to Kalamb, where he was supervising the felling of trees for sleepers, the sale of which forms a large proportion of the income of Swat State. We slept that night solemnly laid out in rows in a tiny clearing high up on the trail, the water singing and tumbling beneath us and the great pines thrusting up into the night sky like ragged banners. A jackal howled in the distance and a pony whinnied somewhere up the

trail. The air was sharp with pine and the night odours of the countryside, the wind cold and fresh like apples in the mouth. As I lay watching the shoulders of the encircling hills crested with stars, I wished with my whole heart that these visible barriers could be translated into spiritual ones, and that the hills and mountains might stand forever impenetrable, like the walls of one of the old *serai*, "against the envy of less happier lands".